The Professional Urgency of Your Digital Presence: Tools and Tips for Councils

by Lara Deloza

If you’re not online, you don’t exist.

Think that sounds overly dramatic? Think again. There are more than 2.4 billion Internet users across the globe—and the web is the first place the majority of those people look when they need information about...well, just about anything.

For IRA councils looking to expand their membership, promote their professional development events, and generate interest in their service projects, having an Internet presence is crucial. And, in this day and age, when anyone with a Wi-Fi connection and working knowledge of word processing software can put together a polished website over the course of the afternoon, it doesn’t make sense not to.

But beyond static websites, which—let’s face it—are so last decade, more and more councils are embracing social media. They’re also eschewing print journals for online counterparts and swapping snail mail newsletters for ones sent electronically.

Some local Massachusetts councils have even started using Padlet (http://padlet.com, formerly Wallwisher) in place of the basic webpage. The free tool offers a blank “wall” that can be populated with everything from simple text to Word docs, photos, and video clips—all of which can be added through a simple drag-and-drop process. (To see more of what Padlet has to offer, visit http://padlet.com/features.)

Here are some other ways that councils are using technology to advance their mission.

For a Quickie Try a Wiki

Councils wanting to move toward a paperless business model should consider the wiki. Wikis aren’t exactly new—WikiWikiWeb, the world’s first wiki, launched in 1995—but their popularity has grown exponentially in their nearly two decades of existence (Wikipedia, anyone?). According to WikiMatrix (www.wikimatrix.org), there are 143 different types of wiki software available.

When she was the state coordinator for the Michigan Reading Association, Beth Nelson started a wiki space as a way to communicate with local council leaders. “I was looking for a platform to reach teachers without face-to-face meetings,” she says.

The web-based application, which functions as a collaborative content management system—think interactive online filing cabinet—gives her “a great way to stay organized as new forms are created and contacts needed.”

The Keystone State Reading Association used a wiki for their recent “iRead” conference, held in October. Prior to the conference, the site was used to advertise offerings. Post-conference, attendees can go to the wiki to download presentation PowerPoints and handouts, see photos from the event, and learn more about award recipients.

Want to explore the wide world of wikis? Visit WikiMatrix.org to compare software features. The site even offers a Wiki Choice Wizard to help you find the best option that fits your needs.

If the thought of starting a wiki overwhelms you, take a look at LiveBinders (www.livebinders.com). Billed as “your 3-ring binder for the web,” LiveBinders present another way to collect content. You can add just about anything to it—web links, documents, PDFs, images, videos, etc.—only LiveBinders are organized by tabs. For some, this makes it easier to navigate than the wiki format.

Padlet from Cape Cod Council
Build Your Social Media Presence

First things first: a Facebook page does not a social media strategy make. Yes, your council should have a Facebook page (and use it regularly). But if you’re interested in truly expanding your council’s reach, it’s important to be active on other social sites such as Twitter and Pinterest.

“The power of Twitter is in its immediacy and connectivity,” says Leandra Elion, New Literacies Chair for the Massachusetts Reading Association. “This is why we want to encourage more of our members to follow us and tweet to share in the professional learning.” (For more on how to use Twitter for professional development, see Donalyn Miller’s article on page 24.)

Leverage Twitter to create excitement about an upcoming event, like the Michigan Reading Association did for its Summer Literature Conference. To encourage registration, the organization tweeted a Top 10 countdown of reasons to come to the event and offered a promo where one lucky attendee could win a free registration to next year’s conference.

The Massachusetts Reading Association established hashtags for their annual conference and recent fall institute. Anyone using the hashtag can join the conversation about these events (including the session speakers!). The council and some of its leaders tweet heavily from the conference as well, a practice known as “live tweeting.”

Pinterest is an educator’s playground and the perfect place to engage existing council members and attract new ones. Elion cites this as one of the main reasons the Massachusetts Reading Association recently joined Pinterest. “We did this to share resources with our members, to promote our organization to a wider range of members, [and] to attract the younger teachers,” she says.

Boards were created based on hot topics in literacy, such as text complexity and teaching with technology. This, Elion says, is part of the appeal. “As new topics and areas of interest emerge, it is easy to create boards to address those areas,” she explains. In addition, the organization started a board for its April 2014 conference—a surefire way to attract attendees.

Don’t forget about LinkedIn, either. After all, it’s the professional social network, and offers several tools councils can utilize, including the ability to start a discussion group right on the site.

Take the Time to Delegate—and Train

Establishing wikis and Pinterest accounts are all well and good, but they won’t do much for your council if you don’t get buy-in from members. The biggest challenge, Nelson says, is getting the councils signed up and using the tools on a regular basis. The second biggest challenge? Maintenance.

To deal with both, the Illinois Reading Council (IRC) formed a technology committee. The group started as an advisory council, says Sherry Sejnost, who serves on the committee. Volunteers were tasked with identifying how technology could further the mission of the IRC.

As a result, local councils each appointed a member to be in charge of tech tools for the council. Leadership meetings provided training for these volunteers to help them learn how to do everything from creating an electronic newsletter to leveraging social media to publicize their events.

For even better buy-in, offer training to your members as well. Add a session or two to your annual conference, or host a one-day workshop. The time you invest now will pay off tenfold down the line.

“Technology takes time to learn, but it is the gateway to our growth as a council,” Nelson says. When it comes to professional development, she says, “many [new teachers] are interested in a ‘get and go’ approach that technology fills. We need to be there to fill it.”

Lara Deloza is the senior writer for the International Reading Association, ldeloza@reading.org.