

ROLE OF A FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL WEBSITE TOWARD OPTIMAL OPERATION OF SA UNIVERSITY

BASAKY, FREDERICK DUNIYA, PhD.

COLLEGE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

SALEM UNIVERSITY, LOKOJA

KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

Abstract

It is important for schools to have a professional and useful website. A school's website can be used for keeping school staff, parents and pupils up to date with what is happening within the school community. Your school's website should be easy for all users to navigate through. Your school's website needs to be welcoming to anyone using it. A professional site will incorporate the school's branding, include up-to-date news, have information on events that happen during the year, include information on school curriculum and courses, and have contact details for the school and staff members. The best school-websites are a communication and engagement hub – not just an online brochure or prospectus. Content is constantly updated by a wide range of staff, showing exactly how much is happening within and outside of the formal curriculum. Everyone can see students being inspired and motivated every day of their school life. A static website that you haven't refreshed for years and which isn't pleasant to use on a smartphone might tell visitors that you're a bit stuck in your ways. Of course, this won't be the 'real you', but it's all they have to go on. The way your school website functions also says something important. A vibrant, attractive website that works perfectly on smartphones and tablets will tell people right away that yours is a forward-thinking school. Fully integrated and active social media accounts demonstrate a commitment to engagement, communication and outreach. All schools say they have a commitment to these things. Your website is an opportunity to show the outside world that you mean it. That it's happening in practice, as part of your normal way of doing things.

Keywords: University, Website, Operations

Introduction

A school website is an ideal tool to communicate with the community. It engages viewers and promotes a strong and readily accessible home/school connection. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and prospective families use this resource to find and share information. Check this list of ten important items every school website should have in order to enhance communication.

- *Design* – The website should have an appealing, welcoming layout that is easy to read and navigate. Create an impression of excellence that exemplifies the school culture.
- *Up to Date* – Ensure that the site is current and revised regularly. Frequent changes encourage parents and students to check in frequently to view photos and/or videos.
- *Contact Information* – Be sure to list the school postal address, phone, and an email contact. The address and phone number should be in the header, and definitely in the footer – a conventional location for contact information in websites.
- *Staff Directory* – Include a current staff list with email contacts to promote communication between teachers, parents, and students.
- *Calendar* – Upcoming key dates, school wide special events, and sports schedules are essential.
- *Class Pages* – Teachers or subject areas can list assignments, homework, project requirements and due dates. Student work should be regularly showcased to build self-esteem and foster a culture of excellence.
- *Documents* – Permission slips, student handbooks, lunch order forms, policy

documents such as behavior or internet acceptable use policies in pdf format save time and resources instead of printing and sending them home with students.

- *E-newsletter* – Have a list of any current and archived newsletters from parent/teacher organizations, class blogs, or teacher news.
- *Education Philosophy* – A short statement of school values helps new families to understand the mission of the school. Curriculum information and extra-curricular activities, a list of courses, school awards, achievements, or grants also help viewers learn about the school.
- *Interaction Opportunities* – Integrate with links to other school social media sites, blogs, or discussion forums to provide additional ways to communicate.
- The role, purpose and importance of the school website is changing at pace in those schools globally that have moved to a digital operational base, are on track to normalize the use of the digital throughout and which are rapidly creating their own unique, tightly integrated digital ecosystem.
- The digital evolution that is transforming every facet of these schools is profoundly impacting those school's websites, fundamentally changing its nature and form, moving the website from its traditional peripheral position to being core and critical to the school's everyday operations, teaching, growth, evolution and enhanced performance and productivity. The time has come when all schools and education authorities need to recognize that change and the profound implications that flow at both the school and education authority level.
- In the traditional highly segmented and insular paper-based school, the website has been viewed as but one of the many largely discrete parts of the school, largely peripheral to the everyday teaching. In many instances it has been window dressing – sometimes very high-quality

window dressing – but in the main it has done little to enhance the pedagogy or student learning. Crucially, the online experience has been viewed as separate from and lesser than the physical.

- In marked contrast, within digitally based schools an opposite, dynamic, ever evolving, working website is central to virtually every operation, including the school's 24/7/365 teaching. Indeed, without that website schools cannot create their desired digital ecosystem and successfully realize their shaping educational and digital vision.
- Try to imagine how organizations like Apple, Amazon, News Ltd or the Tax Office could operate without their websites and readers will begin to appreciate how critical they are to the workings and growth of digitally based schools. That fundamental difference needs to be understood and the discussions begun at the school and system level on what is required to move forward.
- As Waterman and his colleagues observed (Waterman et al, 2014), societies that have normalized the use of the digital no longer differentiate between the online and physical experience.
- If a school wants to remain as a traditional paper-based organization focused on readying its students for paper-based external examinations, those discussions on the website are not needed. If, however, a school's desire is normalize the use of the digital and create a digital school ecosystem that will educate each child for today, then the conversation becomes necessary to decide what is to be done.
- Interestingly, ask any school leader or educational administrator why an opposite website is critical to the successful whole-school embrace of bring your own technology (BYOT) programs or the evolution of the school's ecosystem and it is likely only a handful could tell provide an answer. Moreover, ask a software house to create a website for a digital school and it is

likely even the best and more prescient will still prepare a polished offering for the traditional mode of schooling.

- The article aims to begin remedying those shortcomings and to highlight the core, multifaceted role of the school website – and its associated digital communications suite – in the digital transformation and evolution of schooling.
- **The Traditional Website**
- For the last 15 to 20 years, the school website has been largely peripheral to the school's everyday workings and in particular its teaching. It has been primarily a static source of information, a marketing tool and possibly a gateway to the inner teaching of the school that necessitated password entry. The closed classroom door was retained when the school went online. In many education authorities globally, websites have been 'cookie cut', with their operations tightly controlled by central office bureaucrats and external ICT experts. Schools were invariably given little say in their form, even at a time when schools were being given greater decision-making powers and were obliged to shape their own growth. Even today, at least one Australian education authority still prohibits schools having their own website, while other authorities and their ICT controllers continue to micromanage the nature and workings of the school's site.
- Invariably within the school one individual has had responsibility for maintaining the school site, ensuring it was not 'spoilt' by other staff; although that said one will find schools where the different operational units, like the library or student support services, also operate their own website, separate to that of the school. In many schools, particularly independent schools, the site is maintained by the public relations/marketing unit, who ensure the desired image, with the opposite President smiles, is always to the fore.

- A quick scan of a cross section of school websites (primary and secondary, state and independent) – including the award winners – highlights that most are still primarily sources of information, some very polished, some very dated. A Google search of the 'purpose' or 'importance' of school websites indicates that even the more reasoned, such as the University of Florida website (<http://fcit.usf.edu/websites/chap1/chap1.htm>) still underscores the largely peripheral, information-providing role.
- The choice of the award-winning sites appears to have far more to do with looks, design finesse and interactivity than functionality and how the facility contributes to the realization of the school's educational and digital vision.
- Significantly, most will also be closely 'guarded' sites, with community access to any teaching materials restricted by password.
- **Emergence of the Working Website**
- The first schools that moved to a digital operational base and began their digital evolution in the mid-2000s have continued the on-going transformation and evolution of the school's website that, as indicated by Lee (2013), mirrored the school's evolutionary path and which saw its shift from a peripheral to a core role.
- The website, like those in all other digitally based organizations, plays a central, multi-faceted role. It assists to enhance the school's culture and ecosystem, furthers the school's growth and evolution, enables the school to interface with the networked world and is being used integrally in every facet of the schools' 24/7/365 teaching, integration of all school operations, educational and administrative, and the on-going enhancement of the school's efficiency, effectiveness and productivity.
- The website increasingly became the interface for the school's community and a medium that facilitated the integration of all

the school's operations in and outside of the school walls.

- These are dynamic working sites that are being updated and added to virtually every minute of the day by all within the school's community, be they students, teachers, parents or community members. The focus is very much on the work to be done, educational and administrative, and using the site and associated digital services to do that work as expeditiously, simply, effectively and productively as possible and, where possible, to have the technology simultaneously perform multiple roles and to automate the tasks at hand.
- While rightly concerned to project a professional image, these are 24/7/365 worksites where sections might at any times appear as messy as the physical classroom. To appreciate what is meant by 'working' websites, readers can look, for example, at the websites of The Gulf Harbour School (<http://www.gulpharbour.school.nz>) or that of Broulee Public School (<http://www.brouleepublicschool.nsw.edu.au>). These sites employ a template service that makes it easy for all of the teachers and students, along with interested parents and community members, to publish to the site. Long gone is the sole publisher controlling all uploads, but not a quality controller astutely ensuring unnecessary mess is removed.
- They are multi-purpose entities where the website provides seamless access to a plethora of online facilities and services, removing the divide between the school's physical and online offerings. While reference has been made to the 'website', that is partly a misnomer because, as apparent in both the aforementioned sites, there are links to an ever evolving digital communications suite that includes such diverse services as an emailed school communiqué, an online survey facility, advice on new teaching programs or resources, the online advisement of student

absence, Twitter, Facebook and the facility to instantly inform parents of a critical incident, like a death. Indeed, as a colleague has suggested, it might be opportune to find another term to describe the role played by the website in a digital school.

- The sites are modular in nature, with the schools using a mix of free and leased online services, able to quickly discard superseded modules and replace them with a new, more apposite module.
- Critically, both of these sites are open for anyone to view. Parents, grandparents, interested educators, education authorities or prospective parents all have open access to the day's teaching, being able to readily view and, if they wish, comment on the work. The schools have had to do their homework and have permission to reveal the children and the work, but that is just part of operating within a digital and networked world, collaborating with one's community. The closed doors are opened and teachers and children can proudly reveal the work done.
- Simultaneously, and without any extra effort by the teachers or students, the schools are using the website – through blogs and wikis – to enhance teaching and learning, to enhance the school's ecology daily, to collaborate with and inform the students' homes, to account for the school's work, to receive instant and continual feedback and to automatically promote the school.
- They very much appreciate that the school website provides an invaluable actual insight into the school's thinking, aspirations and daily workings that cannot be replicated by even the best marketers. The website affirms, by virtue of its intimate ties with the school's total operations that the school and its teachers are working within a higher order, tightly integrated digital ecology that simultaneously addresses the many variables that enhance student learning.

- Of note is the number of parents globally who now make their choice of school after scrutinizing the open working websites of the digital pathfinders; Net Generation parents who can explore the natural workings of the school without the public relations spin and experience first-hand the unique digital ecosystem the school has created. The need for a specialist web/PR unit is diminishing.
- This type of school ecology and culture and the use of a website that will further its growth takes, as the many previous articles underscore, years of astute and concerted effort to create. That said, to create that unique, ever evolving, digitally based ecosystem, a school will need to build the creation of the apposite website and complementary digital communications suite into its planning from the outset.

Emotions drive behavior

Decision making is usually more of an emotional than a rational process. We've always suspected this and now neuroscience is proving it. How we act is determined by how people and things make us feel.

For a prospective parent or a talented teacher thinking about applying for a vacancy, your website will be the first place they check to find out about you. The impressions they form there, in those first few instants, will stick with them.

With this in mind, your website should immediately capture the true spirit and ethos of your school. Through imaginative design and evocative photography, visitors can get an accurate sense of what it would actually feel like to be a student, employee, parent or community partner. By engaging the emotions and the senses, you will be helping people form a positive opinion about your school. Simple templates and lackluster photography simply won't achieve this.

A Commitment to Communication

The way your school website functions also says something important. A vibrant, attractive website that works perfectly on smartphones and tablets will tell people right away that yours is a forward-thinking school.

Fully integrated and active social media accounts demonstrate a commitment to engagement, communication and outreach. All schools say they have a commitment to these things. Your website is an opportunity to show the outside world that you mean it. That it's happening in practice, as part of your normal way of doing things.

Prospective parents may also appreciate the reassurance of seeing a school that understands how technology and social networks play an integral part of modern living. They know how important these will be for their child's prospects.

Ready for the future

A static website that you haven't refreshed for years and which isn't pleasant to use on a smartphone might tell visitors that you're a bit stuck in your ways. Of course, this won't be the 'real you', but it's all they have to go on.

The best school websites are a communication and engagement hub – not just an online brochure or prospectus. Content is constantly updated by a wide range of staff, showing exactly how much is happening within and outside of the formal curriculum. Everyone can see students being inspired and motivated every day of their school life. When you visit excellent school websites you see dialogue, communication and engagement facilitated by modern internet and mobile technology. The vision in these schools has moved way ahead of the informative but functional websites that were the norm only a few years ago.

In the current climate, finding funds to invest in marketing and school websites isn't easy. Recruitment is the biggest issue for many schools and the staffing budget naturally becomes the priority. But does that help if the image you project online isn't one that applicants would find attractive and enticing?

Maybe now is the time to invest in a modern web presence that shows the world what you're really all about; one that captures the true spirit of the dynamic and inspirational school behind the site.

Conclusion

If somebody who knew nothing about your school looked at your school website, what would it tell them? Before they've read a single word you've written, site visitors will start to form impressions based on what they see and experience. What would they think, or more importantly *sense* about you from how you present your school online?

First Author: Oghu, Emughedi (B.sc computer science student, Salem University, Lokoja, Kogi state).

Second Author: Apeh Elejo(B.sc computer science student, Salem University, Lokoja, Kogi state).

Third Author: Abdullahi Salifu(B.sc computer science student, Salem University, Lokoja, Kogi state).

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