



The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

LOCATION:
Davis, CA, US

ORGANIZATION:
Davis Community Network

YEAR:
2011

ORGANIZATION URL:
<http://www.dcn.org>

STATUS:
Laureate

PROJECT NAME:
Nonprofit Internet Toolkit

CATEGORY:
Collaboration

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Small, local nonprofits exist to help a community achieve any number of tasks, from assisting schools and taking meals to shut-ins, to organizing youth sports or restoring a local park. They use websites to organize their work, and to communicate with their members, customers, the public, and others. The website is often critically important to their identity, communications and fund-raising. But creating and maintaining a useful website can be a significant problem (as evidence, think of all the weak or outdated websites visible online). A group can build its own site, but may lack the expertise. Or perhaps the group has a web expert but she departs after a year or two, leaving behind a customized site that grows stale, and that members don't know how to use. Moreover, volunteers often move from one group to another over the years; this year's leader of the band boosters might be last year's PTA treasurer, or next year's park cleanup volunteer organizer. When groups each build their own web platform, new members must learn how to use it. The reinvention is a drag on their efficiency, and even a disincentive to participate in the group, because many people find unfamiliar technology to be a barrier. Davis Community Network created the Nonprofit Internet Toolkit, including SimpleSites, to solve this problem in Davis. DCN, using open-source software, assembled the kit with Davis regional needs in mind. We have an agreement with a Davis company to host the sites on their servers. The community has responded. More than 200 local groups use this common web platform, and as a result:

- Volunteers don't have to learn new web communication tools each time they join a participating nonprofit group in Davis.
- The common platform helps the groups communicate among themselves. It lessens, for example, the chance that a document created by one group won't be compatible with the software used by another.
- The platform is free, easy to use and learn, and DCN volunteers offer free training.
- Davis Community Network also maintains the tools, so they don't become unusable as technology evolves. Small nonprofits can use our toolkit's basic SimpleSite, to minimize the work required to get a website up and running. As a group grows, it can move to a full Plone site, continue to use other parts of the toolkit, and still be supported by DCN. The toolkit is not



a complicated idea, but that's partly why we think it is remarkable: the toolkit creates a common web platform among local nonprofits, freeing them to spend more of their resources pursuing their core goals.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

The Nonprofit Internet Toolkit simplifies the use of web and online communication technology by Davis community nonprofits, freeing them to focus on their core goals. It also fosters better online communication and coordination among those groups. More than 200 Davis groups currently use the platform.

PROJECT BENEFIT EXAMPLE

The following example comes from Scott Alumbaugh of the Davis Bike Club: The Davis Bike Club, organized in 1978, has more than 600 members. We offer activities nearly every day, host at least one large cycling event each quarter, and engage in philanthropic giving and activities in our community and beyond. All operations are 100 percent volunteer. Previously, we operated with a static HTML website, created by a club president and hosted on a computer in his living room. The computer also hosted two email lists, one for the membership and one for the board. We mailed a monthly newsletter to members. Website updates were infrequent; email list downtime was high, particularly during the winter storm season; newsletter production and distribution was slow, work-intensive, expensive, and often provided information (such as dates and times for upcoming rides) that was sometimes incorrect, uneditable once printed, and outdated. I am a web designer. Once I convinced the club to update its site, I presented three options: • Replace the current site with an updated HTML site • Create a dynamic website • Ask DCN for assistance Partnering with DCN was the clear choice. We applied for and were offered a full Plone website (instead of a SimpleSite), and three Mailman lists. Following is some idea of how we use DCN's Internet Toolkit and why those tools are so valuable to us. The main point I made to the bike club board was that by using DCN, the club would not depend on me or some other member who happens to come along to take care of the website. Most people don't think about website maintenance and training. For instance, no one thinks about a website being hosted someplace until the website is unavailable due to a power outage. Similarly, everyone wants current information on the website, but no one thinks about who will keep that information current. With DCN, the website is hosted for free by Omsoft [a Davis company, by arrangement with DCN], so there is less downtime. DCN maintains the underlying software infrastructure, so we don't have to worry about security updates or major version migrations. Also, DCN offers classes in SimpleSites, Mailman, social media (Facebook, etc.) and other topics useful for maintaining a viable web presence. DCN's web software, Plone, is enterprise-level quality. With this software in place, we can have a highly functional website. Features include: • A dynamic calendar of our events at a glance • Event announcements and news automatically posted to the home page • Online forms for RSVPs and other purposes • Best of all, Plone makes it possible for anyone to maintain content on the site. We have a handful of volunteers who do. We've replaced our print newsletter with an online newsletter. This saves us hundreds of dollars monthly, and lets us get the news out faster, and make corrections as needed. We have also set up a Facebook page about the club.

IS THIS PROJECT AN INNOVATION, BEST PRACTICE? Yes

ADDITIONAL PROJECT INFORMATION



The Davis Community Network is itself a community nonprofit. We are run by volunteers, except for one paid, part-time office manager. We assembled the toolkit using open-source software, packaged it with Davis needs in mind, teach people how to use it, offer it for free to local nonprofits, and offer support. Read more about us at www.dcn.org or <http://www2.dcn.org/dcn/>

