

Communicating Personality through Your Website

In “Communicating Personality Through Your Website,” Beth Moorhead gives her ideas on how to craft the image that you want to portray through your lifelong learning management system. Moorhead focuses the reader’s addition on the differences between traditional written communication and online communication. Moorhead believes that the medium of the Internet offers the opportunity for creative communication with lifelong learning students and cautions that the unique nature of communicating online can often hamstring communication. The author offers a series of tips to combat common pitfalls encountered when crafting an image over the Internet.

Abstract

There are many different ways that lifelong learning programs convey their personalities to their customers. While it may be hard for an organization (as opposed to an individual) to convey a distinct image, or personality, there are effective ways in which this can be accomplished. There are no hard and fast rules to what can be communicated through a website.

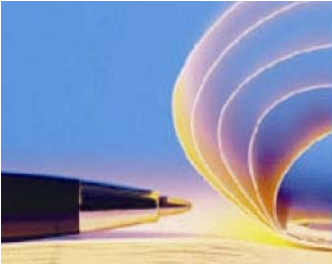
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Whatever design you create, be mindful of how it reflects the goals of your program to customers, both returning and new.

With so many other things to worry about when setting up a learning management system, it is hard to see why you would spend time worrying about the look and feel of your site. So why are image and design important?

1. **First impressions:** For many new customers, your website will be the first time they have seen your program. It is important to make your site memorable. The first impression can be accomplished by creative graphics.
2. **Recognition:** You want returning customers to recognize that your site belongs to you, the same people that they took a class from in the past. Using imagery that is consistent with your program’s pre-online personality will help people to recognize your site.

You don’t have to be Da Vinci or Picasso to create a site that is good at showing who you are. Designing a website for a lifelong learning program inst the same as creating a normal piece of art. With a webpage, you will have to consider some basic realities that even Picasso didn’t have to grapple with:



1. **Ten second attention spans:** Something about the medium of the Internet encourages impatience on the part of the user. It is generally agreed that you need to get someone's attention within ten seconds or your webpage will not be remembered. With a Web application such as a learning management system, there may be a little more leeway with your users' attention spans, but don't bank on it.

It is better to be concise with the content of a Web page and break it up into bite size pieces. Don't be afraid of white space – your computer screen is different from a sheet of paper, since loading a new page on your website is simply a matter of shuffling electrons.

2. **Painting with electrons:** The ease with which someone can shuffle these electrons is often a double edge sword. On the plus side, you can create content and disperse it to a nearly unlimited audience without incurring much extra cost. On the negative side, the Internet brings about the temptation to fill up space, since it is easy and cheap to do. Curb the urge to fill up space just because you can. Brevity is the source of wit, and also an effective webpage.
3. **More than one paintbrush:** When creating a website, you will have several people working on it at a time. They all need to be on the same canvas. Having a distinct and consistent style for your website is important. Picasso painted more than 100,000 works divided into several different "periods" during his career, yet you can generally identify each one as a Picasso painting because he had a singular style of his own.

When you create your website, tasks tend to get delegated to different people. Maybe you have one person design the banner, another do the front page layout and another to create any auxiliary graphics. If more than one person is involved creating your site content, a consensus needs to be reached on one good, consistent design. Communication is paramount.

The best solution for crafting your image is to use a learning management system that is flexible enough to give you a reasonable amount of control over content.

Before your start using the site:

1. **Graphics:** This is the first element of your site that will stick in the mind of your customers. Images tend to make an impression much more quickly than words. With a good lifelong learning management system, you will get a broad enough canvas to set up a unique graphic design for your site.

Generally, lifelong learning programs contract with designers on a limited basis for catalogs and Web design. This is a good place to start with graphics. Grabbing images from past catalogs, or school logos help people recall your site from past experience.

If you don't have a graphic designer, don't fret. Some software vendors have staff available to help you make sense of the graphics process for their learning management system and may be able to help out with some basic design tasks.

2. **Text:** You can customize the look of the text on most pages. You can change the text for your catalog and other pages and most automatic emails and notices. Even though some of these pages qualify as “boilerplate,” you may still be able to change the important text sections to tell your customers what they need to know.

Once again, the key to the text is brevity and simplicity. If you have a message that you want to communicate, break it up into smaller pieces. One of the most effective ways to communicate an idea is by bullet points or a numbered list.

After you set up a site:

3. **Customizable pages:** Some learning management systems have pages that are customizable by program staff, without requiring upload privileges for the website as a whole. These customizable pages tend to have an interface similar to familiar word processing programs, and allow a wide variety of font styles, layouts and colors.

These pages are important because they contain the most current content on your site. If you want to spotlight a promotion or relate some important news, this is the place.

4. **Featured Classes/Events:** Some learning management systems also offer the ability to showcase special events and classes. If you have a class that your customers clamor for, make it easier for them to register. Featured classes and events help to communicate the priorities of your program and bring them to the forefront of your customers’ minds.

To successfully communicate the personality of your learning program requires bringing together several different aspects of your site and intertwining them into one cohesive message. This task may seem daunting at first, but is also made much easier when you realize the unique features of the canvas on which you are “painting.” Once you get the hang of it, it is easier to unleash your creative side.