

Municipal Website Design & Content Guidelines

Introduction

Maintain a professional design. The website can influence the image of your Municipality/community within the province, Canada, and the rest of the world. Therefore, it is imperative that the website give a favourable impression of the Municipality.

Web pages must be of professional quality in terms of design and content. They should be designed with the aim of providing clear and easy access to the services and information provided. Consistent design presents a strong identity, gives the website coherence and integrity, and helps to strengthen the individual and overall messages. This does not mean that all pages must be identical; rather, it means that diversification of pages is permitted (up to a point) as long as there is continuity across the site. It is recommended that, if there is any question about any of these points, you get in touch with the person or organization supervising the site. Certainly contact them before you get too far into a redesign of your page so that they can ensure all pages work together.

Headings and Titles

- Headings and titles must be used so that each part of a website is clearly related and linked to the website as a whole. Readers will always know what page they are viewing and on which part of the Municipal website it resides.
- If you make them too big or contain too many words, it will stretch your pages so wide that most visitors won't be able to see the whole page unless they scroll sideways. Select a font size large enough to catch the eye, but not so large that it overwhelms the rest of the text.

Content

- Write clearly and concisely. Clearly written information will invite visitors to keep reading and will improve the chance that they will receive the message you are sending.
- Written information works best and is easier to read when it is broken up into short, concise paragraphs.
- Do your best to use good grammar and spelling. Run your information through the spellchecker in your word processor before you enter it into your site.
- Long Pages: A long and endless scrolling page is difficult to read.

Font

- Your Municipal template determines the font that is to be used throughout the site. Keeping a consistent font size and color helps to keep consistency throughout your site.
- Stick with common fonts. Be wary of using less common fonts. Although there are many fonts to choose from, if the user does not have a font you choose on their computer, a default font will be used.
- Stay with the same font throughout the page. Do not change font styles. Colors, fonts, and text sizes shouldn't change from section to section - or from page to page in the site. Throughout the site, the pages should look more or less the same.
- Keep the alignment of text the same throughout – if you align the text left keep it left throughout all the pages. (Headings can be aligned independently).

Remember to create a consistent look and feel across pages. That helps keep visitors oriented and comfortable on the site.

Hyperlinks

- Always use descriptive words for link text instead of the simple “Click Here!”
For example:
Incorrect- This site includes tutorials for using programs in the Microsoft Office suite. To view the Microsoft Office tutorials, [click here](#).
Correct- To learn more about using the programs of the Microsoft Office suite, visit the [Microsoft Office tutorial homepage](#).
- All pages must use common link colors and font size (with the exception of headers).

Colors

- Choose colors carefully. Remember this term, "white-space". In general, **white-space is the cornerstone of good website design**. Keep the background areas where your information will be displayed white or another light/pale color. Dark or oddly colored backgrounds distract your visitors from your information and also can make it difficult to read. Background images are also a big don't for the same reasons plus they make your pages load more slowly.
- Colored text should be used sparingly. Otherwise it can be very difficult to read. [Here's an example](#). Try to use colored text only to **emphasize important information**. If you choose to use a color other than black throughout your site

make sure it is dark.

Acronyms

- Do not overuse acronyms. Make sure viewers can easily find the full version of an acronym on every page. Acronyms are useful only if their meaning is clear, otherwise they obscure rather than assist the message.

Sensitivity

- Authors must have sensitivity to how people might view items on the municipal website.

Graphics/Images

The use of graphics can be important in providing an interesting website - as long as you don't over do it. Too many graphics can make the site upload very slow. However, every attempt should be made so that, wherever possible, visitors with text-only access are able to obtain the same information as visitors with full graphics capabilities.

- Graphics should be in JPEG or GIF format.
- **Things That Blink:** Blinking can be annoying and users usually ignore areas with blinking or flashing text or other animations.

Animated images

- Because animated GIFs are comprised of a series of individual frames, the end result is a very large file size that takes forever to download. The more dynamic your animation is, the larger the file size will be and therefore the longer it will take to download.
- Search engine spiders can't read anything contained in an animation. When they come to index your website they are looking for text, not graphics.
- Animated images can give your site that dynamic POP that can really set off your design. But in doing that it can also distract from your overall message, slow down the loading of your pages, and possibly not even be seen if the visitor doesn't have the right software. So, should you really be using it? Keep in mind the saying "Just because you can add something, it doesn't mean that you should."

Image Size

- Try to use the smallest images possible.
- Refrain from using too many images on any one page because both large images and too many will significantly slow down the load time of your page. Your visitor will only wait approximately 20 - 30 seconds for a page to load before he or she becomes impatient and goes elsewhere.
- Resize images first using an image editor on your computer and then upload them to your website. Do not use the web page software to shrink or re-size (size of image will not change!)
- Pixel size for a thumbnail should be no larger than 150 pixels wide. Thumbnails throughout the site should be of uniform size. Larger images should be of a uniform size throughout the site as well.

Alternative Text

- Images all must have descriptive alt tags. If graphics are turned off by the user, the alternative text will be visible in the empty image frame. Also alternative text will appear in a pop-up window when the cursor hovers over the graphic.

Websites filled with graphics may look appealing when you view them on your own computer, but when users access them they can take ages to download. Remember, most people won't hang around on a slow website and will leave your site if they can't find what they want quickly. Photos are fine, and they help to show who you are, but if you have lots then place them on a special "pictures" page so that people can choose whether or not to view them.

Multimedia

Multimedia should be used carefully and in general should not replace the standard textual presentation of information. Large-scale use of multimedia can make visitors without the necessary plug-ins or latest browser version—not to mention the visually or hearing impaired—feel excluded. This does not rule out the use of multimedia, however, choose only from the most commonly used cross-platform types of multimedia formats for delivery over the Internet.

Maintenance

- If you have links to other Web sites you need to check them periodically to make sure the links still take you somewhere because sometimes Web sites disappear.
- **Out of date content**: Keep your website up-to-date.

- **Consistency** is one of the most powerful usability principles: when things always behave the same, users don't have to worry about what will happen. Instead, they know what will happen based on earlier experience.

Site Accessibility

Websites should be accessible for visitors using accessibility devices (such as screen readers and Braille Internet devices).

To make your website accessible to everyone **do not** have the following on your websites:

- **Macromedia FLASH items**
Although FLASH can be fun, and may look great, if your site is built in FLASH and has no alternative navigation then very few visually impaired visitors will be able to use it!
- **Frames**
Frames can cause confusion for some accessibility devices.
- **Blinking, Flickering and Moving Content**
Web users generally ignore blinking, flickering and moving content because of its irritability. Also, displays that flicker or flash can cause photosensitive epileptic seizures.
- **Animated Graphics**
Fast animations can be distracting for average visitors, but for some users they make a site unusable.
- **Graphics**
All graphics on the page should have an ALT tag (image description). By providing a meaningful description even those without sight can build up a mental map of the page. Even if you want to use graphics to illustrate a point, *make sure you also supply text for those who cannot (or choose not to) view graphics.* Screen readers are for people who are blind. These aids make on-screen information available as synthesized speech or a refreshable Braille display. They can only translate text information. Images can be translated, if there is alternative text describing the image.
- **Instructions that rely on colours**
For example, don't say "click the green button to continue".
- **Low contrasts**
For people with certain visual impairments ensure that appropriate contrasts exist. For example don't use dark orange text on a red background.

- Make sure all text is readable and content is accessible to assistive technology, such as screen readers.
- Color Deficiencies
About 8% of men and 0.04% of women suffer from some form of color deficiency. The most common form of color deficiency is red-green, which is the inability to distinguish between red and green. The second most common form is blue-yellow. So avoid using color combinations that could cause problems for color deficient users.
- Bright Blue and Red Headache
Looking at bright blue and red together can cause a headache-inducing condition called Chromostereopsis. This condition causes the viewer to perceive that one color floating above the other. So, avoid using bright red and blue on the same Web page

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- As in any other media publishing environment, exercise extreme care that you have permission to use material, text or images from another source.