



10 THINGS MEMBERS WANT FROM YOUR ASSOCIATION WEBSITE

Considering Web Usability in the Member Experience



- 1** **Make Me Feel At Home**
User Centric Navigation Focuses on Members' Needs First
- 2** **Don't Let Me Get Lost**
Good Navigation Helps Users Get Around...and Engage!
- 3** **Help Me Find You**
Follow Search Engine Optimization Best Practices
- 4** **Don't Confuse Me**
Clean, Uncluttered Layouts Communicate Value and Engage
- 5** **Don't Throw Me for a Loop**
Consistent Page Elements Help Your Members Transact Their Business
- 6** **Make Me Stay a While**
Use Good, Relevant Content Written in Plain English and for the Web
- 7** **Show Me People Like Me**
Say "No" to Stock Photos: Use Real Photos of Your Members
- 8** **Let Me Share Your Knowledge**
Integrate with Social Media and Add Tools for Content Sharing
- 9** **Help Me Buy Something From You**
Include Conversion Points with Strong Calls to Action (CTA)
- 10** **Go Where I Go**
Embrace Mobile and Develop an Experience for all Devices with Responsive Design



Make Me Feel At Home

User Centric Navigation Focuses on Members' Needs First

When your association members come to your website, they are visiting because they need to solve a problem.

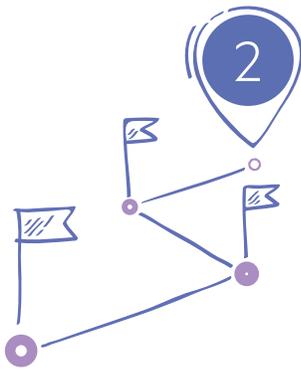
They need to renew their certification and are worried they don't have enough credits. They need to find a vendor because the one they lined-up cancelled at the last minute. There's a regulatory change that could completely upend their business. The stress is there, and they are counting on your website to solve their problem.

This is where **user centered navigation** comes in. Too many association websites look like an org chart, expecting visitors to know which department has the answer. A better approach is to **understand the user through research and discovery, and prioritize the likely reasons users are coming.** Common reasons and pain points include:

- Continuing education
- Networking and connecting with other professionals
- Getting industry news
- Finding a resource
- Getting or renewing certification
- Learning about regulatory updates

A good example of this in practice is the site that Sitefinity Platinum Partner Vanguard Technology developed for the American Society of Radiologic Technologists (www.asrt.org). Continuing education is the primary driver, so it is not only prominent in the navigation, but has conversion points throughout the experience.

This all starts with research and knowing your user. Once you do that, you can delight your members instead of annoying them.



Don't Let Me Get Lost

Good Navigation Helps Users Get Around...and Engage!

As our experience shows association websites are big...really big. While a large for-profit site typically tops out at 300 pages, a “small” association website has more than 1,000 web pages once you include all the things the organization does, unique content, events, committees and more.

It's no wonder users get lost. In fact, a Vanguard Technology survey found that the top two complaints members have about their website are:

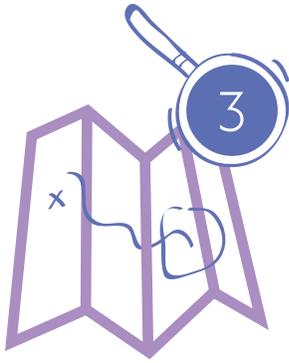
- Hard to find needed information (60.9% cited this as their primary issue)
- Poor usability (46.4% cited this as their primary issue)

This is why clear, concise and consistent navigation is crucial for a good member experience on your website. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Keep the structure of your **primary navigation short and simple**
- **Include footer** links and navigation at the bottom of every page in your site
- Use **breadcrumbs** on every page so users are aware of their navigation trail
- Include a **Search Box** near the top of your site
- Include **links within your page copy** and make it clear where those links go to (Hint: This is also great for Search Engine Optimization)

To see this in practice, check out the site for the Fort Worth Chapter of the Texas Society of CPAs (www.fortworthcpa.org). You'll notice a concise primary navigation with only five options, footer links that provide an on-page “sitemap” for users and breadcrumb navigation right under the page title.

With these basics in mind, site visitors will efficiently find their way around your site and engage with your organization. Returning members will also quickly learn where content “lives” in your site and will be more likely to use those parts of the site. All of this means greater member value (and higher likelihood they will renew).



Help Me Find You

Follow Search Engine Optimization Best Practices

Associations are natural thought leaders and like to be known as “go-to-experts” for their niche. However when we ask web users, “How do you research something related to your work,” their answer is always “Google.” Not “I visit my association’s website.”

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is constantly evolving with new technologies to help web users find the right websites. But where should you start?

Develop Good Search Phrases

First of all, your association’s acronym is not a search term. Conduct good keyword research to identify the right terms for your organization. Look at your industry and identify key terms that apply to your area of expertise. Consider the following:

- What are the hottest topics at your conferences or in your publications?
- What search terms help you find your competitors—whether it’s another association or a vendor offering education?
- Look at your website analytics, what terms already deliver traffic?
- What key terms do the media use about your industry in either mainstream media or business trades?

Write Great Content

Most associations do this well already. However, make it more search engine friendly by remembering:

- Use your key terms in the headline and body copy. But don’t overdo it. Your copy will become unreadable, and some search engines penalize sites for “keyword stuffing.”
- Don’t put all of your content behind your member login. Once your content is behind a member login it is invisible to search engines. Make some content available to the general public—and search engines.

SEO is Everyone’s Job

Search Engine Optimization is not a one-time project. It should be a priority for everyone adding website content. Make sure they know the key terms, most relevant pages and URL guidelines.



Don't Confuse Me

Clean, Uncluttered Layouts Communicate Value and Engage

Your association website represents your organization and what you have to offer. When a potential (or even current) member visits it they are thinking:

- Is this organization credible?
- Do they have the information I need to do better in my profession?
- Can I quickly find the information I came here for?

If they answer “yes” to the first one, but can’t find what they came for, they will click back to Google in search of the answers they need.

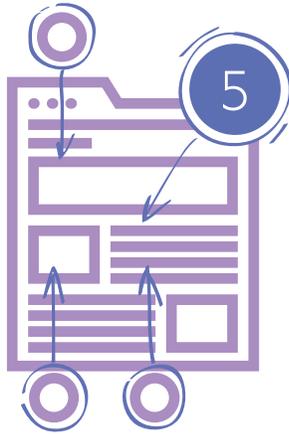
Ensure they stay by eliminating clutter and distractions. Here are some tips to make your website clean and uncluttered:

Proper Use of Colors Use the right colors to draw attention to select elements. Don't try to make everything jump out. The result will be the opposite—nothing will stand out. Avoid a chaotic mix of colors on your website and stick to two to four colors.

Avoid Anything Unnecessary Using Flash animations because they look cool is the wrong strategy. In most cases, it is best not to use animated background or background music. Only use media and animations to help support content and information.

Create a Clear Navigation Structure and organize page elements in a grid fashion (as opposed to randomly scattered). Also, don't be afraid of white space—and avoid clutter.

Use Good Typography Make sure your website is legible. Use fonts, font sizes and font colors that are easy to read. For easier page scanning, use bulleted lists, section headers, and short paragraphs (more on this later).



Don't Throw Me for a Loop

Consistent Page Elements Help Your Members Transact Their Business

Have you stepped out of the elevator in an unfamiliar building and spun around a couple of times looking for the exit? Remember that feeling of not knowing what direction is what?

That's how web users feel when they land on a website totally different from what they typically experience on the web.

The reality is that your website is not a daily destination for your members like CNN or Facebook. In fact, data analysis from 10 Vanguard Technology redesign projects shows that members visit your association's website at best "a few times a month" (40.7%) and more like "a few times a year" (44.7%).

Every now and then we have a client look at a wireframe and say, "It looks just like every other site." That's the point. Because for the few times someone comes to your website, we want the site to follow web standards so your users:

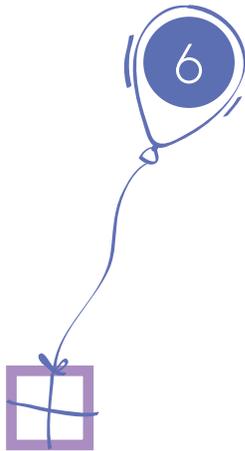
- Know what features to expect
- Know what certain page elements do
- Know where to find these features on your site (and use them)
- Don't have to think too much to use your site

Key standards to follow include:

- **Setting your logo in the top left corner** where the eye first lands on the page
 - Another best practice is to always have it linked back to the homepage so wherever the user is, they can return home.
- **Placing the member login in top right corner** Consistent logins across the web from Google to Amazon have their login in the top right corner.
- **Inserting a search box near the top of the page** for users who are looking for specific content and know exactly what they are looking for.
- **Putting subpage navigation in a sidebar** to help users find your deeper content.
- **Using footer navigation** so users have options of somewhere to navigate to next when they scroll to the bottom of your page.

As **Jakob Nielsen says, "users spend most of their time on other websites."**

By following these principles, you ensure that when your members get to your site they are able to navigate and read your content.



Make Me Stay a While

Use Good, Relevant Content Written in Plain English and for the Web

Associations are prolific content creators—conferences, journals, press releases, position papers, blogs, social networks and more. There’s no shortage of content. And yet, it is rarely maximized on the association’s website.

So how do you put this most valuable asset to work in your website?

Start with unique content that shows the value you deliver to your industry or profession. As the leader of your association, the content you decide to publish (or not publish) sets the standard of what the industry considers thought leadership. Make your website the “go-to” place for industry know-how.

Keep your content fresh Having one-year old press releases and news on your homepage doesn’t instill confidence or communicate that you are leading your industry. Build an editorial calendar for your website that ensures you are regularly publishing new content that keeps your members coming back.

Use plain English Your members and long-time industry colleagues may know all your terminology and acronyms. But potential members and non-member site visitors may not be “in” on the language. Professional language has its place. But jargon terms and phrases will confuse and alienate potential members.

Write for the web Web users **only read about 25% of the text** on a page and scan pages rather than actually read them. When writing for the web be sure to:

- Highlight keywords
- Use meaningful, relevant sub-headings
- Include bulleted lists
- Have only one idea per paragraph
- Start with the conclusion and write in an inverted pyramid style
- Cut the word count by 50% (or more) than conventional writing



Show Me People Like Me

Say “No” to Stock Photos: Use Real Photos of Your Members

Images can be a powerful if used wisely. For example, consider stock photography. Stock images are everywhere because they are easily accessible and inexpensive. But are they good to use?

Marketing Experiments performed a test [comparing the use of stock photography versus real imagery](#) on a website, measuring their effects on lead generation. What they found was that **photos of real people out-performed the stock photos by 95%**.

Why? Because stock images tend to be irrelevant.

Resist the temptation to use photos of fake smiling business people.

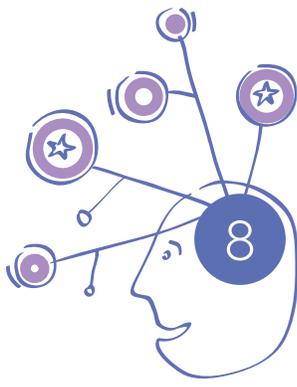
People photos are good. If they are real people.

An [eye tracking study by Jakob Nielsen](#) reviewed pages with listings of company staff including photos and bios. When examining how people viewed the page, the study found that viewers spent **10% more time looking at photos** than reading the bios.

For associations, this presents two great opportunities:

- **Show off your members** Include photos and case studies of your members. Their real stories and experiences not only resonate with potential members, but create a visual connection that engages the user on the page.
- **Introduce Your Staff** One of the most visited pages in an association website is the Contact Us page. When a visitor is on this page, they are looking for someone who can answer their question. Start to build a relationship with this member (or potential member) by including staff photos.

The key point to this is that these photos are of actual members and actual staff.



10 Things Members Want from Your Association Website

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Let Me Share Your Knowledge

Integrate with Social Media and Add Tools for Content Sharing

Today's Internet is equivalent to a fire hose of content trying to be consumed by an individual holding a drinking glass.

To put numbers to this, the **Boston Globe** reported in 2010 that the total amount of information created on the world's electronic devices would surpass the **zettabyte** mark—that's a one with 21 zeroes (or one trillion gigabytes). That's a lot of data.

So with all this information online, how does one make sense of what's important and what isn't? The same as we do in real life—we trust friends and colleagues.

Sharing Builds Relationships

Sharing information is part of the human experience. From our ancestors who passed down oral histories to today's click of the share button, knowledge is power. There are two sides in the sharing relationship to consider:

- **Sharers** Individuals have many reasons for why they choose to share, ranging from self-promotion to just being helpful. The key is, they have to find your content relevant, engaging and good enough that they want to share it.
- **Clickers** For users looking for information, their relationship with the sharer is paramount. If they trust someone of authority in the industry, they will believe the content is relevant and then click on it. If it is someone they know personally, the content comes with instant credibility.

The bottom line is that with this established relationship, users don't need to wade through all the online content, instead they find what is most relevant to them—based on a recommendation.

Sharing Drives (the Right) Traffic

If you look at your web analytics, you will see this in action already. Shared content drives not only more traffic but also **better visitors**. The users that typically come to your site will stay longer and view more pages. You can see this in action in your web analytics in the Traffic Sources reports. Look at bounce rates and pages viewed to see the difference.

Sharing Tools Deliver Engagement

The most efficient way for web users to share are in-page tools found on many websites such as “Like this on Facebook” or “Tweet This.” With tools such as AddThis, users simply click on the button and share the page in their social circles.

AddThis tracks what tools people use to share content across the 14 million websites that use their service. Here are just a few trends from AddThis' [2013 Social Sharing Trend Report](#):

- **Facebook accounts for 42%** of all online sharing
- **Twitter accounts for 13%** of online sharing
- **Pinterest** saw its market share grow 50% in 2013 and now accounts for more than 2% of total online shares
- **Email** is still a strong platform for sharing content and makes up 3% of total online shares

The bottom line is that people ARE sharing content online. The only question is are they sharing yours?



Help Me Buy Something From You Include Conversion Points with Strong Calls to Action (CTA)

Whether it's a membership, conference registration or just a how-to guide, your website is a tool to sell something to your members and audiences. The first step in that potential sale is to make sure you have an effective conversion point with a strong Call to Action (CTA) to drive the user towards a sales path.

A successful CTA drives a visitor to take a desired action and is best placed above the fold (the area seen when the page first loads). By keeping them in plain sight, your visitors know where to take the next step.

Some key things to consider in developing a strong Call to Action:

Make Your CTAs Stand Out Not only should your CTA be bigger and bolder than most elements on the page, but it should graphically stand out and be visually interesting. Consider contrasting colors and white space to make it stand out.

CTAs offer value for the user, not the organization The key to getting the user to click is to make them an offer that solves a pain point. For example, the city and date of your annual conference is not a call to action. But "Register Now and Save \$100" gives immediate value. Go back to your audience personas to identify your audience's pain points and develop CTAs that answer their problems.

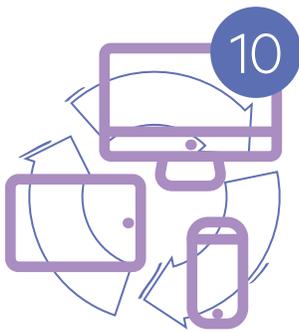
Make your CTA clickable Make sure the user knows to click on it by offering a blatant "click here" or add a hover effect. The key is to communicate that there is an action or something to do behind the CTA.

Test, test, test Try using different colors, language and placement to see which CTAs get more clicks and drive more sales.

You don't have to make every CTA an image or an advertisement Go ahead and include calls to action in your content. Some sample "test based" CTAs could be:

- Download our ultimate guide to INSERT TOPIC
- If you found this helpful, share it on Facebook or Twitter
- Stay informed of this and other important policy issues by signing up for our Action Alerts

The point is to make an "ask" of your reader that drives your organization's goals.



Go Where I Go

Embrace Mobile and Develop an Experience for all Devices with Responsive Design

Mobile and tablet computers are now everywhere. So why are you still designing a site for only one experience?

Today's devices include not just a plethora of mobile devices with varying screen resolutions, but also many tablet devices with their own specifications. This is why the concept of Responsive Web Design (RWD) is so important. RWD is device-agnostic and changes the web experience based on the resolution of the browser.

Think “Mobile First”

The mobile/tablet web is not a desktop site made smaller. Users have less time to absorb the content and need to make their decisions quicker. Prioritize content and layout based on user needs. As the screen resolution gets larger, add in other content and design elements while still addressing WIIFM (What's In It For Me).

Consider Context

It is important to not simply re-arrange content to fit into a device, but consider the **context in which the content is experienced**. Look beyond simply emulating your website across multiple devices, rather provide functionality and content to your members in a way that makes sense to the situation they might happen to be in at the moment.

An event planner might need suppliers, so instant access to your member directory on their mobile device is extremely valuable. A realtor might need access to a mortgage calculator more than they need access to your upcoming annual conference registration.

Consider these uses and the context in which your website will be used on one of these devices as you plan for the mobile web experience.

Plan Ahead

Building an experience for all devices takes time and requires additional effort. As you look at your redesign process keep in mind that you now need to develop at least three designs and implement them. Yes, this will add time to your project and increase the cost. But you will now give the web experience your members expect by delivering your content on all devices. (Plus, you'll save time in the long run as you no longer need to maintain both a mobile and a desktop site).

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ABOUT VANGUARD TECHNOLOGY

Vanguard Technology is a Telerik Sitefinity Platinum Partner that serves associations exclusively. Vanguard has been in business since 1998, and takes a holistic approach to website development with a full breadth of services from discovery through launch and beyond. Vanguard values the people side of business and talks business before tech, focusing on relevant solutions over “shiny objects.” The company knows each association’s needs are unique and has a proven method to strike the balance between member and organizational needs online.

Vanguard Technology features the Sitefinity CMS exclusively and has worked with Sitefinity for more than 5 years and 60+ projects. Vanguard was also Sitefinity Partner of the Year in 2012.

For more about Vanguard Technology, visit its website at www.vtcus.com.



ABOUT TELERIK

Telerik empowers its customers to create compelling app experiences across any screen. Our end-to-end platform uniquely combines industry-leading UI tools with cloud services to simplify the entire app development lifecycle. Telerik tools and services can be adopted individually or as a platform and seamlessly integrated with other popular developer solutions. More than 130,000 customers from 40,000 organizations in 94 countries depend on Telerik products, including more than 450 of the Fortune 500®, academic institutions, governments and non-profits.

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