

## Designing Websites for LRE Centers

by Hilary Glazer

Websites are everywhere. Of course, every huge corporation has at least one, and it seems like all teenagers do too. The reason for this popularity is clear—they're a simple, low cost, effective way of getting out news and linking people together.

Many law-related education projects have set up websites and found them a useful outreach tool. In 2002, for example, the Social Science Education Consortium published a report on the use of the Internet by state law-related education (LRE) centers<sup>1</sup> using data that had been collected from 1998–2002. The findings showed that most, but not all, state centers had established an online presence.

The researchers found that most of those sites could be improved upon in one way or another. Since all of the sites differed in terms of size, content, navigation, etc., improvement could mean anything from adding more teacher-friendly content to gaining more exposure/publicity for the site to exploring the site's usage statistics.

The purpose of this bulletin is to help you make the most of your online efforts. Whether your site is already online or in the early stages of development, these tips will help you make sure your site is as effective as it can be.

### Best Practices for Website Design

**Ease of navigation.** One of the biggest mistakes you can make is designing a site that's hard to use. Ideally, you want your site to be intuitive—easy to move around and easy to figure out. If you create different main sections of your site, be sure they're all accessible from every page. That way, users can jump to each section no matter where they are. This doesn't mean that every single page (such as those housed

within the main sections) should be accessible from every single other page, just that the main content areas (and your organization's home page) should be one click away no matter where the user is on your site. And speaking of one-click-away, don't torment your users by asking them to click on page after page after page after page in order for them to find information. In other words, keep the drill-down to a minimum.

**Readability is key.** In an effort to make your site easy on the eyes, **avoid** the following:

- **Underlining**—On the Web, words and phrases that appear underlined usually signify that there's a link; if you're employing underlining just for emphasis, you might trick your users into thinking they should click on words that aren't links. If you need to emphasize something, you're better off using boldface.
- **Overusing boldface**—While using boldface for emphasis is a good technique, make sure you don't overdo it. It's easy to think that everything on your site is important information, but you're not doing your readers any favors by bolding everything. When everything's coming up bolded, it not only lessens your credibility, but also makes it harder for your readers to discern the main points they need to come away with. Carefully select which words and phrases deserve to stand out and keep bolding to a minimum.
- **Overusing different font colors and italics**—Sure, pink and purple and green are pretty colors, but if you start using different colors for all of your text, you're making your site harder to read, less aesthetically pleasing, and less credible. If you must use an accent color on your site, use it sparingly. If you're using italics for quoted material or titles (of books, cases, etc.), that's fine, but just remember to close the tags (if you're hand-coding

your site, for instance) or turn off the italics (if you're using a WYSIWYG [What You See Is What You Get] editor) so that everything else on the page doesn't appear italicized. Many font errors—such as entire pages in bold, italics, or in a specific color—occur simply because the closing tags were forgotten.

**Less is more.** While it's true that some people don't mind scrolling down a long page, it's still a good idea to break up your content in order to avoid "information overload." This doesn't mean that you should create one page per paragraph, only that you should avoid having a multitude of content crammed onto one page. It's fine to spread an article over a few pages, but if you do this, also consider offering a user-friendly alternative: the entire article available as a .PDF. Having whole documents ready for downloading and printing out makes your content much more accessible, valuable, and user-friendly.

**Compelling, current content.** If your site uses dates ("Coming summer 2002" or "Posted April 1995"), remove them. Content can appear outdated (even if it isn't) and users may think you don't update your site regularly. While there are some exceptions (for example, if there's an upcoming conference or meeting, or you keep a "What's New" or "Announcements" page on your site), generally it's a good practice to leave off posting dates. If you use "Coming Soon" pages, try to update them in a timely fashion. And keep

"Coming Soon" pages to a minimum as well. A site that features too many of these pages may come across as undeveloped and not worth a user's time, especially if every section that's clicked on just says "Coming Soon."

**Contact information.** It sounds like a no-brainer to include contact information, but you'd be surprised how hard it is to find this information on some sites. You can decide for yourself whether to provide contact information for your whole staff, but at the very least provide contact information for one person. Be sure to list a full range of ways for users to contact your organization; e-mail, of course, but don't forget the older technology—list your snail mail address, and your phone and fax numbers. Keep this information up-to-date, and make sure e-mail addresses are coded so that people can click on them.

**Search mechanism.** Adding a search function can make your site more user-friendly. Sometimes people know exactly what they're looking for but aren't sure where it's housed within your site. By allowing visitors to conduct searches using keywords, you're not only increasing your site's usefulness, you're also opening it up to people who might otherwise get frustrated and leave. Search functions are particularly useful on large sites.

**Offer a listserve.** Listserves are e-mail lists that can be used to distribute information or to engage users with common interests into interacting with one another. You could set up an announcement list that people can opt into (i.e., join voluntarily) to learn about new programs, training opportunities, etc. In addition, you could set up a list that gets teachers/resource persons interacting with one another. (See "Surveys" on page 4)

**Offer free downloads.** If your organization provides pamphlets/brochures to the public, consider making them into .PDFs that your audience can download, print out, and reproduce. Offering .PDFs can reduce costs both to your organization (no postage fees!) and the public. If you do make .PDFs available on your site, consider the size (in kilobytes/megabytes) of the document: The larger a document is, the longer it will take to download, especially if your site visitors have slow connections to the Internet. Keeping this in mind, you should make sure that your .PDFs are optimized for fast web delivery.

**Error-proofing.** Before your site goes live, test it using a variety of different browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Opera) and browser versions; not everyone will have the latest and greatest technology available, and you want to make sure your site reaches as many people as it can. This doesn't mean you should code your site to be compatible with the first browser ever used, but it does mean you should strive for some level of backwards compatibility. In other words, if browser version 11.0 has just been released, make sure your site can also be viewed by browser versions 9 and 10. This rule



Chair, Standing Committee on Public Education: Alan Kopit  
Director, Division for Public Education: Mabel C. McKinney-Browning  
Editor: Charles White

© 2004 American Bar Association  
PC # 497-0118 ISSN: 1-59031-459-X

This is one in a series of technical assistance bulletins on law-related education published by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education, 321 N. Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60610-4714; (312) 988-5735, FAX (312) 988-5494.  
www.abanet.org/publiced E-mail: abapubed@abanet.org

General permission to photocopy or otherwise reproduce, and/or to republish, for non-profit educational purposes, all or part of the material in this booklet is granted, provided that reference is made to this publication, its date or issue, and that reproduction and/or reprinting privileges were granted by permission of the American Bar Association on behalf of its Division for Public Education.

Prepared under Grant #2003-MU-FX-K015 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice; we are grateful for its support.

The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and have not been approved by the House of Delegates or the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association and, accordingly, should not be construed as representing the policy of the American Bar Association, the Fund for Justice and Education, or the Division for Public Education.

FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE, CALL (312) 988-5522.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Printed on recycled paper.

Produced by Creative Services Associates, Inc.

The American Bar Association is a not-for-profit corporation.



is most applicable to sites using Java Scripts, applets, DHTML, CSS, etc. And if you're building a site using Flash, be sure to offer a non-Flash version as well; you don't want to force your audience to download any applications in order for them to use your site.

But it's not just browser compatibility you need to worry about—make sure all of your internal links work, too (we'll get to the external links later). If this sounds like an afterthought, it shouldn't be; a simple typo can mean the difference between a site that works well and a site riddled with errors. So click on them all, tedious as it may be. And whenever you add new content, or change the structure of your site, be sure to test the links then, too.

**Dead links.** Your site might link to only a few other websites, or it might link to a lot of them. You might link only to another organization's homepage (main URL, Uniform Resource Locator, also known as a site's web address), or you might have deeper links to specific content within their site. Whatever the case is, you should occasionally test all of your external links to make sure they still work, especially if you do a lot of deep linking. This is because sites often undergo change, and change can result in a new domain name or an entirely redesigned website. When a site undergoes redesign, its content links may change, and the page you're linking to might be gone. This doesn't necessarily mean that the content is gone, just that it's housed in a different directory or that its page extension (.htm, .html, .cfm, etc.) has changed. While some sites will automatically forward you to the page in question, sometimes you're just left to figure out where the page is. And since you don't want your audience trolling sites looking for content, it's best for you to find it first and update your links.

Keeping your links current and correct is important—if you've ever gone to a site and clicked on link after link only to end up with error messages, you know how frustrating it can be. Not only do you not get the information you need, but you also end up losing faith in the site that provided the links in the first place. You can maintain your site's credibility by providing a site with links that work. If you're unable to test all of your links by hand, there are automated link checkers provided for free on the Web, and your HTML editor may also come equipped with one.

### **If You Build It, They Will Come**

So you've launched your site and now everyone will be rushing to your pages to see what's there, right? Wrong. Just because you've designed a nice website with tons of helpful content doesn't guarantee you a plethora of visitors. People need to know your site exists before they can visit it, so you need to do a few things to get the word out.

### **No Website? No Worries.**

If you don't have a website yet, here are some ways to get started.

- Think about what you want on your website. Take time to develop ideas for content sections. Ask for input from your staff, or if you're just going it alone, come up with a few ideas and ask for input from colleagues. Also be sure to visit websites of similar organizations in your field just to see what's out there.
- When thinking about design and graphics, remember that content is king. Focus less on bells and whistles (animation, Flash movies) and more on how user-friendly your design is.
- If you're part of a larger organization, find out how you can become part of its website, what steps you'll need to take, who you'll need to work with, whether or not you can have your own domain name, etc.
- If you don't have any idea how to build a website, but you have some funding at your disposal, consider hiring a vendor to work with you. You can find vendors in a variety of ways: 1) visit sites you find graphically appealing and well organized. If the site developer is not readily apparent (i.e., it doesn't say anywhere on the site who designed it), e-mail the webmaster or other contact on the site and ask; 2) do a search for web designers in your area and set up interviews with them; 3) word of mouth. Ask colleagues and other associates who they've used for website design.
- If you end up using a vendor, make sure they understand what your organization does and work with them to come up with a solution that best fits your needs. While vendors may be experts in their field, you're the expert in yours; don't be pushed into accepting a web design that doesn't communicate your material well.

**Traditional means.** Write a press release for inclusion in appropriate newsletters and journals, or send out a flyer to people you already have in your database. Be sure to include the proper URL so your readers will know exactly where to find your site. Word of mouth also helps; anytime you're at a meeting or giving a presentation, be sure to plug your site and hand out any literature that includes the URL. And don't forget to include it on your business cards, too.

**Electronic means.** Chances are your database includes resource persons, teachers, volunteer judges and lawyers...and their e-mail addresses. Send out an e-mail announcing your website (again include the URL, which will most likely show up in the e-mail as a handy link your recipients can click on).

Beyond sending out e-mails, consider contacting other organizations to see if they'll include your site as a link. Ideally, the organizations will be ones you're already working with, and once they know about your site, they'll most likely be happy to provide the link. If your site links to their site, mention it, and that you'd appreciate a reciprocal link. (For more about the importance of linking, see "Search Engines" below.)

**Search Engines.** Getting included in search engines can be tricky. Beyond submitting your site (and then possibly waiting a few weeks for it to be approved/included in the engine's database), much of what you can do to optimize your site for search engines should actually be done before you go live. Because most search engines use "robots" or "spiders" to visit sites to determine what the site is about, how important the site is, etc., you need to make sure the spider can actually see what's on your site. More specifically, the simpler your coding is, the easier it is for the spider to discern what's on your site. What looks good to a spider? Well, a spider is mostly concerned with basic HTML and text. So if your site is comprised mostly of graphics and Flash movies, odds are the spider will ignore your site.

Here are some other ways to increase your odds of being included in search engines. You might need to check with your webmaster to see if your site already employs these methods, or to discuss a plan of action to incorporate any/all of them.

1. Create meaningful titles for each of your pages to be used in the <title> </title> tags that appear in your page's coding. Figure out what the content of each page is and then use that for the title. For instance, if a page is about background information on the United States court system, you might title it "Background on U.S. Courts." Keep in mind that each page should have its own distinct title; in other words, avoid using your organization's name as the title for each page.
2. Use META tags. META tags contain information about your page that might be used by spiders or web browsers. Among the different types of META tags are ones for "keywords" and "description." Although the "keywords" tag seems to be on the decline (many search engine spiders are no longer looking to this tag to discover information about a site/page), the "description" tag is still a good one to use. In this area, you can provide a brief description of your page or site that might be used in search engine results. Of course, not every search engine will use the information in this tag, and some may only use an abridged version, but

it's still a good method for providing a general overview about your page's content.

3. Another thing many search engines look to is your site's popularity. A site's popularity is determined in part by how many other sites link to it. Generally, the more sites that link to you, the higher your popularity is, and the better your chances of showing up in search engines are. Remember that the World Wide Web is just that—a web of sites that are linked to each other. To find out what your site's popularity is, visit [www.linkpopularity.com](http://www.linkpopularity.com) or [www.linkpopularitycheck.com](http://www.linkpopularitycheck.com).

### **They Came, They Saw, But When and How?**

The best way to get a handle on who's coming to your site—how they're getting there, what they're looking at, etc.—is to look at your site's usage statistics. Check with your webmaster to see where your statistics are coming from. You can find them from your Internet Service Provider's logs, from software running on your server, or from a free tracking service offered on the Web, such as: [www.extreme-dm.com](http://www.extreme-dm.com) and [www.nedstat.com/usa](http://www.nedstat.com/usa). Depending on the type of reports you're getting, you may be able to find out any or all of the following:

- Types of browsers and operating systems used by your visitors
- When your visitors are coming to your site (which times of day, which days, which months)
- How long your visitors are staying on your site (length of visits)
- Which pages of your site are getting the most traffic
- Navigation path your visitors are following
- Number of individual visitors
- Where your visitors were before hitting your site (referring URL)
- Which search engines your visitors are coming from
- What keywords visitors use to find your site
- What part of the world your visitors are coming from

What can you do with this information? Plenty. By figuring out which pages are getting the most views, you can determine the type of content your visitors want. If you have pages that aren't getting many views, ask yourself the following:

- Is this information something my visitors would consider useful? If it is, perhaps it's just buried on your site and your users can't find it. If that's the case, consider linking to it from a page that gets a lot of traffic.

- Is this information outdated? If the page is about an event that happened years ago and is no longer of interest, you could either repurpose the content (if need be) or just get rid of it.

Of course, there are other questions to ask as well, and another way to find out what your users want and need is to ask them directly.

**Surveys.** By using an online survey, you can get feedback from your visitors that will help you tailor your site to their needs. Online surveys don't need to be long and unwieldy, just be sure to cover a few major areas and include a place for comments/suggestions. You could ask visitors what part of your site is most useful, least useful, what's not provided that would be helpful, how often they visit your site, etc. You could also ask them to identify themselves by profession (e.g., teacher, lawyer) and how long they've been involved in LRE. Ask about ease of navigation and visual appeal of your site.

A survey might also help you find out if features you're considering adding will be useful or a waste of time and money. For instance, if you're thinking of encouraging interaction among your visitors (e.g., by providing chatrooms or message boards) first ask them if that's something they'd find helpful. If most of your visitors say that they wouldn't use such features because they have neither the time nor inclination, then there's not much sense in developing them. For more information about surveys, visit [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

**Keep on Truckin'.** Once you've built your site and learned about its usage, your job's not done. Maintaining a website is an ongoing process as you continue to expand your site and its outreach. Keep looking at the statistics, adding content and links, and remember that your website is one of the best ways to educate and inform your visitors about the field of LRE.

## Resources

The following websites offer information on everything from search engine indexing to best practices in website development. While some sites may be intended for professional web designers, all contain information of interest to anyone who has a website.

[www.digital-web.com](http://www.digital-web.com)— Digital Web Magazine

[www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com)—Search Engine Watch

[www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)—Useit.com (Jakob Nielsen's website)

[www.webreference.com](http://www.webreference.com)—WebReference.com

[www.w3c.org](http://www.w3c.org)—World Wide Web Consortium

[www.webmasterworld.com](http://www.webmasterworld.com)

## Common Abbreviations/Glossary

**CSS**—Cascading Style Sheets. Coding that defines the style or presentation (e.g., font attributes, margins, etc.) of a site's content, usually kept as a separate file that is referred to across the site.

**DHTML**—Dynamic HTML. Combination of HTML and scripting language to produce static pages that feel dynamic/interactive via the use of rollovers, forms, etc.

**Flash**—Technology which uses vector graphics to enhance websites in a variety of different ways, including delivering content via animation and movies. Developed by Macromedia.

**HTML**—HyperText Markup Language. Main language used for Web publishing.

**.PDF**—Portable Document Format. Electronic file that preserves the look (images, fonts, layout etc.) of its source document.

**Spider**—Program used by search engines to visit, record and index information from websites for inclusion in the search engine's database. Also called robot.

**Tags**—Coding used to define attributes for different aspects of a webpage; the building blocks of a webpage. Tags are used for everything from creating the HTML page itself to the title page to specific fonts, font size, font color, links, etc. A META tag is just another type of tag.

**URL**—Uniform Resource Locator. Address or location of files on the Web.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *State Law-Related Education Centers' Use of the Internet to Enhance Their Programs* was sponsored by Youth for Justice, a national program of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The data included: 1) a survey of the state center directors (e.g., whether or not their centers had websites (and if not, why not), how often the sites are updated, who maintains the sites and how much time is spent on maintenance, number of monthly visitors, usage data, goals of sites, etc.) and 2) reviews of the websites using specific criteria, such as whether or not the site appears in searches done through major search engines; ease of navigability; visual appeal; major content areas provided, etc.

## Technical Assistance Bulletin Series

Technical Assistance Bulletins (TABs) are developed and published by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education. Other publications in this series provide concise information on specific topics of interest to law-related educators, school administrators, teachers, law enforcement, and delinquency prevention professionals. Each bulletin may be downloaded from the ABA Web site as a .pdf. ([www.abanet.org/publiced/tabs.html](http://www.abanet.org/publiced/tabs.html)).

### Available titles include:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>TAB 1:</b> Bar Associations Share Their Tips for Working with the Schools | <b>TAB 14:</b> Youth Summits: Youth and Adults as Partners in Violence Prevention                                  |
| <b>TAB 2:</b> Selected Background Readings on Law-Related Education (LRE)    | <b>TAB 15:</b> Law Magnet Programs   |
| <b>TAB 3:</b> Mobilizing Community Groups for Law-Related Education          | <b>TAB 16:</b> Vicarious Violence on the Screen: A Challenge to Educators and Families                             |
| <b>TAB 4:</b> A Review of Innovative Approaches to LRE                       | <b>TAB 17:</b> Youth Court: A National Movement  |
| <b>TAB 5:</b> Confronting the Crisis in the Criminal Justice System          | <b>TAB 18:</b> Youth Summits: Engaging Young People in Violence Prevention   |
| <b>TAB 6:</b> Combating Drug Abuse   | <b>TAB 19:</b> The Promise of Law-Related Education as Delinquency Prevention                                      |
| <b>TAB 7:</b> Juvenile Correction Education: A Review of Current Literature  | <b>TAB 21:</b> Police Officers and Law-Related Education: Building a Winning Strategy for Youth Education Programs |
| <b>TAB 8:</b> LRE Research: A Status Report                                  | <b>TAB 22:</b> The Role of the Resource Person in Law-Related Education  |
| <b>TAB 9:</b> Strengthening Minority Involvement in Law-Related Education    | <b>TAB 23:</b> Whose Values? A Rationale for Linking Law-Related Education and Character Education                 |
| <b>TAB 10:</b> Bar Association Database Continues to Grow                    | <b>TAB 24:</b> Designing Websites for LRE Centers  |
| <b>TAB 11:</b> Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools: An LRE Laboratory      | <b>TAB 25:</b> Making Youth Court as Effective as Possible   |
| <b>TAB 12:</b> Planting International Seeds                                  | <b>TAB 26:</b> Youth Court Training for Results  |
| <b>TAB 13:</b> From Risk to Resilience: The Role of Law-Related Education    |  |



## *Youth for Justice*

To learn more about Youth for Justice, the national coordinated law-related education program, its efforts to incorporate effective delinquency prevention strategies in LRE programs, and its work with law enforcement personnel as resource persons, contact the individual consortium member listed below or visit [www.youthforjustice.org](http://www.youthforjustice.org).

### **American Bar Association**

Division for Public Education  
Mabel C. McKinney-Browning, Director  
Michelle Parrini, Program Manager  
Katie Fraser, Program Manager  
321 N. Clark Street  
Chicago, IL 60610-4714  
Tel: 312-988-5735  
Fax: 312-988-5494  
E-mail: [abapubed@abanet.org](mailto:abapubed@abanet.org)  
Web: [www.abanet.org/publiced/](http://www.abanet.org/publiced/)

### **Center for Civic Education**

Roy Erickson, Director of Justice  
Education Programs  
5145 Douglas Fir Road  
Calabasas, CA 91302  
Tel: 800-350-4223  
Fax: 818-591-9330  
E-mail: [cacoord49@aol.com](mailto:cacoord49@aol.com)  
Web: [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

Norma Wright, Senior Consultant  
101 Shell Road, #25  
Watsonville, CA 95076-9665  
Tel: 831-724-5241  
Fax: 831-761-9160  
E-mail: [normaw3253@aol.com](mailto:normaw3253@aol.com)

Barbara Miller  
Center for Education in Law and Democracy  
300 High Street  
PO Box 18490  
Denver, CO 80218-4022  
Tel: 303-778-7441  
Fax: 303-733-4791  
E-mail: [miller@lawanddemocracy.org](mailto:miller@lawanddemocracy.org)

### **Constitutional Rights Foundation**

Todd Clark, Executive Director  
601 S. Kingsley Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90005  
Tel: 213-487-5590  
Fax: 213-386-0459  
E-mail: [todd@crf-usa.org](mailto:todd@crf-usa.org)  
Web: [www.crf-usa.org](http://www.crf-usa.org)

### **Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago**

Carolyn Pereira, Executive Director  
E-mail: [pereira@crfc.org](mailto:pereira@crfc.org)  
Nisan Chavkin, Associate Director  
E-mail: [chavkin@crfc.org](mailto:chavkin@crfc.org)  
Margie Chan, Office Administrator  
E-mail: [chan@crfc.org](mailto:chan@crfc.org)  
407 S. Dearborn, Suite 1700  
Chicago, IL 60605  
Tel: 312-663-9057  
Fax: 312-663-4321  
Web: [www.crfc.org](http://www.crfc.org)

### **Phi Alpha Delta Public Service Center**

Carole Collins, Coordinator  
345 N. Charles Street  
Baltimore, MD 21201  
Tel: 410-347-3118  
Fax: 410-347-3119  
E-mail: [psc@pad.org](mailto:psc@pad.org)  
Web: [www.pad.org](http://www.pad.org)

### **Street Law, Inc.**

Lee Arbetman, Director of U.S. Programs  
1010 Wayne Avenue  
Suite 870  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
Tel: 301-589-1130  
Fax: 301-589-1131  
E-mail: [larbetman@streetlaw.org](mailto:larbetman@streetlaw.org)  
Web: [www.streetlaw.org](http://www.streetlaw.org)



### **AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION**

321 N. Clark Street  
Chicago, IL 60610-4714  
<http://www.abanet.org/publiced>  
(312) 988-5735  
E-mail: [abapubed@abanet.org](mailto:abapubed@abanet.org)