

Online Tools: Using Technology to Recruit and Engage Members

This handout is a compilation of several LWWUS guides, with additional information from LWVMA.

The way non-profit organizations reach out and connect to potential members and engage current members is constantly changing, thanks to ever-evolving technology. To most effectively reach new members and keep our current members interested and coming back for more experiences with the League (and maybe one day leading the League!), we need to keep current and use the technology available to us to be most effective and accessible.

Below you'll find a sampling of very simple but specific ways local Leagues can utilize technology to become more visible and ubiquitous in the community, interact with current and potential members, and develop new leaders. ***These are first steps.***

Please note that you may want to create a plan with your local League board about what technologies you plan to use, when you will develop them, and who will take charge of the effort. Remember that implementing the use of new technology can be a great engagement technique in and of itself (i.e., it's a discrete task that you can ask a less active/engaged member to take on)!

All Leagues should have a website that is updated regularly. In short, if you don't have a website in this day and age, people won't know you exist. Or, if they have heard of the League, they won't believe it is a credible group if they don't find a web presence for it. Other social media, such as a Facebook page or a Blog, are not useful until a website is established with a maintenance plan in place. Quite simply, a website is absolutely critical.

TIPS FOR LOCAL LEAGUE WEBSITES

In the "For Members" section of the LWWUS website, there are tips for writing for local and state League websites at: <http://www.lwv.org/content/basics-writing-web>

Be sure to keep your website up-to-date with the latest news and the upcoming events; the only thing worse than having no website is having one with really old information on it. In addition, from time to time, have someone new to the League or even outside League (a friend or family member) review the site with "fresh eyes." They can help to assess if the site is clear, if it's easy to understand how to get involved, and shows a strong connection to the community.

On the LWWUS website, there is a template kit based on the layout and branding of the new LWWUS website. You can find the kit at: <http://lwv.org/content/league-website-templates-kit>.

In recent years, Leagues have come a long way in integrating new technology into their practices. Almost half of all League members have an email address in our database, many Leagues send out their monthly newsletters electronically, and more and more Leagues have been creating websites. Websites have vastly increased the visibility and accessibility of local Leagues in their communities. However, just as imperative as it is to have a website, it is important that League websites are easy for visitors to find, read, and navigate.

The information contained on the sites has to be current, and the sites have to be regularly and consistently promoted. This memo provides some basic tips on how to make your website as effective and inviting as possible. It also provides detailed suggestions about how to make your League's site a successful membership recruitment tool.

Domain Name

The name of your website is very important! The URL should be short, simple, and memorable. You want people to be able to find your website with little or no effort. Here are a few domain name tips:

- A good practice is simply to use your League's name in the URL. For example: www.lwvpsc.org - LWV of Palm Beach County; and www.lwvtexas.org - LWV of Texas.

- Obtaining a simple domain name can cost as little as \$10 per year. Websites like www.godaddy.com, www.register.com, and www.networksolutions.com offer domain name registration and simple website creation.
- When creating your website's domain name, *keep it simple!* Avoid using excessive punctuation (/ \ ~ _ -) or prepositions (the, of, etc.) in your domain name. Make it a name that rolls off the tongue so you can tell people easily and they'll remember it.
- While there are free website hosting options from community or search engine sites, they do have some downsides. Yes, they are free - but they often make your domain name counterintuitive. For example, LWV of Collier County's (FL) old web address was www.naples.net/presents/lwvcc. They recently upgraded to www.lwvcolliercounty.org; much easier to say and promote.

Website Readability

Information is powerful. However, too much information is overwhelming and not being able to read the information is just frustrating. When creating your website, be choosy about what you say and how you format it. Here are a few tips for making the most out a few words:

- Your website is often the first contact with many potential new members so you must place emphasis on making it as professional looking as your newsletter, signs, or other visibility/communications tools.
- Most League sites are designed primarily for members and therefore unwittingly exclude non-members just by the choice of language and content. Avoid League lingo - especially on the front page.
- Do not place too much information on your home or front page. The front page should briefly describe who/what the League is, a place to Join/Donate and how to navigate the page.
- Make sure the most important information is "above the fold" (the area that appears on the screen that you do not need to scroll down to see). Require the visitor to scroll only when absolutely necessary.
- Keep it simple. Use simple, concise, easy to understand words. Avoid empty descriptive words like "great," "wonderful," etc. They are just not necessary.
- Check your spelling and grammar. It sounds basic but is crucial for credibility.
- Keep it scannable. It is important to have some white space on the site. To minimize eyestrain, keep paragraphs concise and text organized with headers. Also include a visually interesting image or graphic, such as the LWV Logo, a face, something so it's not all just text.
- Font formats like **bold**, *italics*, and underlines draw reader's attention away from the content, so use them sparingly. Underlines are customarily only used for hyperlinks (which direct you to another website or page). *Underlining a headline or piece of information without a hyperlink can confuse a reader.*
- Verdana font was designed for computer monitors and is considered the most easily read. Make sure your font size is not too large, yet is readable.
- Do not use patterned graphic backgrounds behind the body text. Use black font on a white or near white background.

Navigating

Good navigation allows a first-time, non-technical visitor to move around your site easily. If a site is easy to navigate, visitors will return to it. Here are some tips to help ensure that your website is easy to navigate:

- Your site need not be large or complex.
- Every page should display the same overall appearance, with the same navigation options in the same place.

- Do not offer too many links in your navigation menu. Just like too many words, too many links and pages confuse visitors trying to find information. If you have a lot of pages use drop down menus that group them according to main topics.
- Many websites, of all types, fail to be effective because they lack a good intuitive navigation system. Good navigation gives visitors constant clues to answer three basic questions: Where am I? Where have I been? Where can I go?
- Always give your user a way out; don't let him/her navigate to a dead end. The back key is a solution but not a good one - not all users know it even exists!

Testing Your Site

It is important that after you spend time retooling your website that you test it out to make sure it meets your goals.

- Test your site from a technical viewpoint in different browsers. Internet Explorer 5+, Mozilla Firefox 1.0, Opera 7.0 and Netscape Navigator 6+ makeup 95% of the worlds browsers.
- Make sure your site can be seen on different screen resolutions. 98% of users have 800x600 and above resolution, thus, 800x600 can be taken as the minimum resolution the site should fit.
- Ensure your pages download quickly. For this you must:
 - Minimize graphics, flash and scripts: They hugely increase your file size.
 - Optimize your HTML & script code: Make sure that your site doesn't have any unwanted tags or unused scripts.
 - Use Server Side Include (SSI) files wherever possible. SSI files once called from the web server reside in its cache so on subsequent requests they load faster.
- Test your site with real first-time users. Remember, you may know your site backwards. They do not.
- After your members test it out, find non-members to critique your site. They are your primary target audience for recruitment after all.

Maintaining League Websites

Your League website is a living document. It is not something that can be put up and ignored. It must be maintained. Content must be current/fresh. Here are a few tips to keep you on top of website maintenance.

- A League webmaster or team needs a clear job description. The League should state clearly what is expected of them. If the webmaster/web team leader is not a member of your League's leadership team, then there should be a clear line of communication/responsibility to the League leaders. Communication with your webmaster should be two-way; leaders who do not have experience with web design should especially be open to ideas brought forward by those providing the technical assistance of creating and maintaining the site.
- If there is no one technical in your League to take on the webmaster role to you can use a pre-designed template system. Consider finding an intern or making an investment in your League's future by paying someone.
- Some Leagues can benefit from "CMS" – Content Management Systems – is a system whereby different people have permission to update content within a site, without reference to the webmaster. It enables different departments to post their latest news and activities online, using only a browser interface, accessed via a password– which enables multiple users to keep the site updated.
- Most importantly, **don't leave out-of-date content online!** It is crucial for credibility and clarity. You can keep it in an "archive" or note that information is there for "background" purposes or "history."

The "Join Us" Message

What is the tone of your League's website? It should be welcoming! Your League website is a great vehicle for recruiting new members. Here are some additional tips for making membership recruitment a seamless function of your website.

- Pepper a recruitment message throughout the website and use it prominently on the home/front page. Visitors should know after leaving the site that the League of Women Voters is where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement!
- Visitors should also be frequently reminded to join. "Join Us" links should be placed on *every* page and prominently placed on the home/front page. It should link to a page specifically dedicated to League membership. A "Join Us" web page example template is located at the end of this memo.
- Use Stories! Personalize your website by using your members' stories. Stories can personalize a membership ask or show a new side to an important issue that your League is working on. Stories build personal connections, and your website is the ideal place to connect with potential new members.
- One page of your website should be dedicated to membership and should include:
 - Brief overview of the League and its mission.
 - Membership requirement information
 - Cost of membership
 - A downloadable or printable membership form for visitors to print out and send in.
 - Contact information in case of questions
- A Membership Message! - "LWV is the organization where your hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement! Join LWV and be directly involved in shaping the important issues to keep our community strong." Feel free to use this or your own membership message. Just be sure to say at the end "Join Us."
- **Continuous promotion of your website with a membership message is important.** Include references to your League website in speeches, one-on-one communications, press releases, and in all other League communications.

We hope that this information is useful to make your League website as effective as possible. There are several additional tools available to assist Leagues in developing their site including Website templates, League logo and usage guidelines, and League Easy Web (LEW). These are available in Tools for Leaders in the For Members section and at <http://lwvnet.org>.

Sample "Join Us" Web page Template

Join the League of Women Voters of (LEAGUE NAME)

The League of Women Voters is the organization where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement. Add your voice to over 100,000 League members and supporters across the country in making democracy work.

Join the League of Women Voters, a respected national grassroots organization, where individuals like you are actively engaged in creating positive change on the local, state, and national levels. Become a member and serve as a leader in your community, and work to shape the important issues that keep our communities strong.

We are -

- *Acting as a force to create positive, lasting change in our communities*
- *Empowering millions of voters to protect their right to vote.*
- *Educating citizens and fostering dialogue on pertinent issues - from healthcare and climate change to openness in government.*

- *Working to ensure that ALL votes are counted and ALL voices are heard.*
- *Preserving our constitutional rights.*
- *Working together to make democracy work!*

We believe that sensible, responsible civil discourse and action based on substance rather than partisanship is essential for civic improvement. We believe that with leaders like you, we can make democracy work.

Currently LWV of (LEAGUE NAME) is working on -

- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*
- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*
- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*

Membership is open to men and women 18 years or older. Annual dues are \$(SINGLE PERSON RATE) per person, \$(HOUSEHOLD RATE) for two people in the same household, and \$(ANY OTHER MEMBERSHIP TYPE - ASSOCIATE, STUDENT, ETC.). Membership in the League of Women Voters of (LEAGUE NAME) includes membership in the LWV United States and LWV (STATE). Dues are not tax-deductible.

Join us (LINK TO LEAGUE MEMBERSHIP FORM) and be part of the solution! Our community needs leaders like you to help ensure that our community is a strong, safe and vibrant place to live. Become a member and start receiving benefits today. Contact (NAME) at (PHONE NUMBER) or (EMAIL ADDRESS) for more information about League membership.

OTHER TECHNOLOGY TOOLS:

ALREADY HAVE A GOOD WEBSITE? TRY USING FACEBOOK, FLICKR, SHUTTERFLY, AND/OR TWITTER.

Social network sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) allow people to build a network or online community. A social network site will usually provide various ways for users to interact, such as IM (chat/ instant messaging), email, video sharing, photo sharing, blogging, discussion groups, etc. There is usually a way to connect with friends (by allowing users to create a profile page), and users can make new friends through shared interests or activities.

The National League and hundreds of Leagues across the country have already begun experimenting with social media. If your local League already has an up-to-date website, using Facebook, Flickr, Shutterfly, and/or Twitter is the next phase of your technology outreach. "Techsoup" (<http://home.techsoup.org/pages/default.aspx>) is a free website that has a detailed discussion of these social media sites and how to use them.

If you have a Facebook account, you can join a Facebook group with other social media-savvy League leaders to get tips and tools to navigate social media. Search for "**League of Women Voters New Media.**" Once at the group page, click "Ask to Join Group" to be authorized by LWVUS to join.

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER:

Publishing and mailing newsletters can be very expensive for local Leagues. Now, many organizations are using electronic newsletters sent via email to keep their members informed.

Creating an electronic newsletter can be very easy! For those who are not particularly computer-savvy, a newsletter can be created in Microsoft Word. Microsoft has a helpful how-to article for more information (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/word-help/staying-in-touch-with-customers-create-an-e-mail-newsletter-in-word-HA001045106.aspx>).

As stated in the article, here is what you'll need to do:

1. Develop your mailing list
2. Set up your newsletter template (which can be updated with new articles before sending)
3. Complete your e-mail newsletter
4. Send your newsletter

For those who are more computer-savvy, you may want to branch out to more sophisticated software to create your League's newsletter. You can use HTML, Microsoft Publisher, or other software.

Be sure to post your newsletters to your League's website and include a *Join* message in every edition. And, remember that there is no cost associated with sending out an electronic newsletter, so distribute it widely. Follow up with potential members, donors, and individuals who attended a recent event. Encourage current members to forward the link to the newsletter to friends with a personal ask to join.

YOUTUBE

YouTube is the "the largest worldwide video-sharing community" and provides Leagues with a great platform to connect to their community via video. On YouTube, you can post videos from League events, video conversations from your League spokesperson, and commercials about the value of being a League member by creating a channel for your local League.

For ideas on how to utilize YouTube, check out the LWVUS YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/lwvuf?blend=21&ob=5>).

Want to start your own League YouTube page? Here are a few resources to get you started:

- For basic how-to information on using YouTube, go to: http://www.youtube.com/t/about_getting_started.
- Tips on the YouTube website about creating a channel for a non-profit (http://www.youtube.com/t/ngo_tips).

SURVEYMONKEY

SurveyMonkey is a service that allows you to create online surveys. The most basic package of tools is FREE! Information about how to use their application is available on their site at www.surveymonkey.com. In short, it is a very easy-to-use method to collect feedback in a professional way at no cost to the League.

Here are some examples of how Leagues can use this tool:

- Create an online interest survey for members or potential members to complete. Find out what they are interested in, when they are available, or even how they learned about the League. Any information that is collected can be downloaded as a spreadsheet – ready to use and to share with other League leaders!
- Create an online survey as a follow up to a League event. Send the link to the survey to individuals who signed in at your most recent League event. Ask them questions about the event --- How was it? What would make it more successful? What other topics/events would they like to see in the future? By gathering their feedback, you are engaging them in the organization. You are empowering them with a possible role in the future of the League; you are showing them how they can make a difference within the organization. Another question might be: How did you hear about the event? This will help League leaders to know what visibility approaches are working and what ones are not. It will help us to be more strategic in our outreach.
- An online survey could be used to have people register in advance for an event. By giving an RSVP, someone might be more committed to attending an event. You can also send out follow up reminders as the date gets closer. And, best of all, you get their contact information for future use!

EVITE (www.evite.com)

Evite invitations are free to send and receive. Just select your invitation design, add your guests' email addresses and send via email. You choose the invitation features you want, and your guest replies are tracked automatically so you always have an accurate headcount.

Optional invitation features include:

- Adding polls for your guests to answer — find out what movie, food or music everybody prefers
- Letting guests select items to bring — great for potlucks and other group-run events
- Allowing guests to invite more people to the event

DOODLE and MEETING WIZARD

Doodle (www.doodle.com) and Meeting Wizard (www.meetingwizard.com) are **free** online tools to help schedule meetings among a group of people, and to take polls. Meeting Wizard is a little more proactive; it sends meeting confirmations and reminders to attendees. Doodle has a paid, premium version that does more than the free service.

CONFERENCE CALLS

You can set up an account for a free conference call number at www.freeconference.com. They will email you a telephone number and an access code. You then email that info to everyone who will be on the call with the date and time you've all agreed to. At the appointed time everyone calls the number, they will be prompted to enter the code and you're all set. Nothing more is necessary. You only need to register once and use the same call-in number and code for all of your conference calls. NB: The conference service is free, but calling incurs toll charges or use of minutes.

CONSTANT CONTACT and MAIL CHIMP

Constant Contact, Mail Chimp and others are online email marketing services. Some are fee-based; others (like Mail Chimp) are free up to certain number of email addresses.

www.constantcontact.com

www.mailchimp.com