

Suggested Guidelines for Creating a Masonic Website.

As part of the Grand Lodge initiative to better utilize modern technology, we bring you thoughts and comments on designing a website. We have pared down a very long list of what we feel are good practices to just two pages. If you want more suggestions, we certainly have more opinions and can also give you reference to more extensive non-Masonic web design sites. While most of the tips apply to all websites, some of the comments are specific to websites for Masonic Lodges.

1. Keep it simple. There is a tendency to stuff everything on the homepage. Web travelers, like most people, have a short attention span. If they find the homepage difficult to understand, cluttered, or hard to use, they will leave possibly never to return.
2. Tell them who you are. Have the name of your Lodge, number, and town proudly displayed along with the fact that you are a Masonic Lodge, AF&AM, chartered under the Grand Lodge of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Also, your Lodge number should be preceded by "No." which is preferred over "#."
3. Use variations in colors, font, and such to make each of your pages easy to read, and focus on the information that you want the reader to notice first.
4. Use pictures such as the Lodge building and Lodge officers.
5. Provide a consistent look and feel to the user and try to make the usage intuitive, so you don't have to provide a lot of explanation on how to get around your web site.
6. Display the square and compasses.
7. Before you start implementing the website, take the time to design all of your pages. Decide on transitions, and content, and then build a set of pages that are consistent in presentation, density, and navigation. Ask yourself: why would someone access your site? Who is your intended audience? What information do you want to convey? When the user leaves your website, what impressions do you want a visitor to take with them?.
8. Provide navigation. Use a list or a pull down menu that will link to your supporting pages. Keep the navigation as intuitive as you can.
9. There is a concept called "Bread Crumbs," which should be near the top of a page and shows the relative navigation from the homepage. It gives the user a feeling for the relative location. The typical form is HomePage> *Level 1*> *Level 2*.
10. It is also a good idea to give the user a quick way of returning to the homepage by having a *home* button. This can also be accomplished with breadcrumbs.

11. Another nice technique is to change the colors of each link that the user has visited, so the user can keep track of where they have been within your website.
12. A bane of websites is that users may access your web site from various browsers of various versions. Try to stick with standard coding practices that are interpreted in a consistent manner by the common browsers.
13. A word on density. You may have the urge to stack as much information as you can on the homepage and end up with a very dense page on which you are trying to provide everything. This gets back to the first tip of keeping it simple. By designing your website before you start, your site will be more coherent and usually cleaner to implement. Also, like someone designed it.
14. Nice things to include: a map to the Lodge, calendar of activities, how to contact you for further information, pictures of Lodge activities, especially community and charity activities. Providing a calendar of events is particularly useful for Brothers visiting the area and would like to attend a meeting. You might consider putting your trestleboard online.
15. In terms of information that is published on the website. It is a good idea to personally ask the individual Brothers before posting their information, such as telephone numbers and addresses on the website.
16. There are sites on the web where you can get templates or which will give you a free hosting or other service in exchange for running their advertising on your site. This should be strongly discouraged for several reasons including the potential of perceived endorsement of their products by Masons. Use of links to non-Masonic sites should also be discouraged because you don't know where those links might send a user who originally came to visit your website.
17. This one is a pet bias, but Masonry often gets negative press for being a secret society. We discourage the use of passwords and members only areas by which you limit access to the general public. There are times that you have a good reason to limit access, but when you do you are inviting people to try and hack into your website. When you do want to restrict information, something like a password is useful. Just be aware that many hackers will take it as a challenge. Never post anything even to a private section that could be embarrassing or detrimental to any of the members or the Lodge, the Grand Lodge, or Masonry in general.
18. Include a disclaimer. It is unfortunate that there are people who will try to maliciously take advantage of good intentions. Here is suggested wording. We will probably tighten this up later and get Grand Lodge sanction but here is something to think about: "This is the official Web site of XXXXX Lodge No. NN of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The information on this website is provided as a public service only and should not be used for commercial purposes. Unless otherwise explicitly stated, the material on the website is provided "as is" and without warranty of any kind. All express or implied conditions, representations and warranties, including any

implied warranty of merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, or non-infringement, are disclaimed. While it is our goal to keep this website accurate and current, no representations, warranties, guaranties as to the quality, suitability, accuracy or completeness of any of the materials contained on this website are made. Please enjoy your visit to our website. If you have comments to help us improve this website feel free to contact us at _____@_____.”

19. Test your website. Before publishing please send me the link, and I will take a look at it and get back with comments. Also, have other people, preferably using different browsers, e.g. Netscape and Internet Explorer of various versions, to access your website.
20. Once you get your website up and published, keep it current. You should also visit the site frequently, just to insure that someone has not corrupted your site.
21. Last year we published general guidance for websites. This will be updated to address criteria for articles. The website is yours, but keep in mind that whatever you put on your website reflects on all Masons. If you have information that you want to publish on your website and have any questions concerning suitability, just let your Committee on Internet know. We will look at your site and give an opinion, including sending to the Grand Lodge Officers for their opinions.