

GUIDELINE NO GL-32

A.A. WEB SITES: SETTING UP A LOCAL WEB SITE

Decisions in the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous are usually made through an informed group conscience and the decision to create a Web site is no different. Whether area or district, central office or intergroup, A.A. experience suggests forming a committee to discuss all aspects of the project, including all possible concerns about the Traditions.

Early on, it is important to agree upon a method for establishing the group conscience that represents the local A.A. community, and for informing local groups, districts and central/intergroup offices in an area (if affected) about the committee's progress. When the committee has reached a consensus about its role and responsibilities and the scope of the Web site, its findings are shared with the whole body (district, area, etc.) and a decision is made through an informed group conscience vote on whether to move ahead with the development of a Web site. As part of this process, committees may wish to bring technical questions to experts in the field.

SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on A.A.'s strength and history of personal and intimate sharing, the spiritual nature of "one drunk talking to another" is an ongoing concern when discussing technology as a source of A.A. information. Even many Internet-savvy A.A. members say that they do not want the ease of new technology to detract from the one-on-one sharing that has been so essential to our Fellowship and our recovery from alcoholism. It is helpful to remember that there is no need to let the speed of technology dictate the speed of our actions.

Based on shared experience to date, Web site committees not only discuss the technical aspects of developing a Web site but also address questions related to preserving the spiritual connection created by one alcoholic talking with another. Some committees have reported a loss of the "personal touch" when relying too heavily on technology, while others report that they have found a balance that works for them. It will be up to a committee's informed group conscience to determine what A.A. content is useful and appropriate. The good news is that today's decisions can be reviewed, revised, abandoned or expanded. A committee can always try something for a certain length of time and then come back and determine how well it is working. This is the A.A. way!

WEB SITE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

After an informed group conscience structure is in place to decide the contents, policies and procedures involved in setting up and maintaining an A.A. Web site, it has been suggested that a Web master (Web manager) be appointed or elected. The Web master is responsible to the committee or the groups served.

One area has the following experience: Their Web site committee is composed of six A.A.s: the Web chairperson, area Public Information (P.I.) chairperson, a current district committee member (D.C.M.), a past delegate, a current general service representative (G.S.R.) and an ad hoc member. The latter three individuals are selected by the Web site chairperson, and their term of service is two years. In addition, a Web master, alternate Web master and other ad hoc members are responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the Web site. (Experience indicates this can be time-consuming if the Web master is responsible for updating local meeting information.)

Some committees choose to create their own Web site guidelines, including:

description of the site's purpose;

details of the Web site's content;

procedures for adding or removing content;

committee rotation schedule;

defining the difference between a Web site committee and a Web site maintenance team (e.g. Web master and alternate); guidelines for the Web site committee and, if applicable, guidelines for the Web team outlining its composition and responsibilities.

SELECTING A DOMAIN NAME

The choice of a domain name should, as other critical elements, be determined by an informed group conscience. To preserve Alcoholics Anonymous' trademarks and service marks, Web site committees are asked to avoid using the marks "A.A.," "Alcoholics Anonymous," and/or "The Big Book" in their domain names. It has been our experience that many service entities have integrated lower case "aa" into their domain names along with other identifying information (e.g., www.aacentraloffice.org.au or www.area999aa.org.au).

This has proved to be a positive resolution in support of A.A.'s trademarks and service marks.

WEB SITE CONTENTS

Copyright restrictions protect material displayed on Web sites just as copyrights protect A.A.'s printed literature. Permission must be obtained from General Service Office of AA Australia prior to including A.A.W.S. or A.A. Grapevine material.

Just as with A.A. newsletters, Web sites created by A.A. areas, districts and central/intergroup offices can quote a phrase, sentence or brief paragraph excerpted from A.A. literature – such as the Big Book (*Alcoholics Anonymous*), *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, *The A.A. Service Manual*, and Conference-approved pamphlets—without a prior, written request. When this occurs, the proper credit line should be included to ensure that A.A. literature copyrights are protected. After a brief quotation from a book or pamphlet, the following credit line should appear:

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A.A. TRADITIONS

We observe all A.A.'s principles and Traditions on A.A. Web sites. **Anonymity**—As anonymity is the “spiritual foundation of all our Traditions,” we practice anonymity on public A.A. Web sites at all times.

Unless password-protected, an A.A. Web site is a public medium, and, therefore, requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film. In simplest form, this means that A.A.s do not identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full face photos. For more information on anonymity online, see the section of this Guideline, “Guarding Anonymity Online.”

Attraction not promotion—As our co-founder, Bill W., wrote: “Public information takes many forms – the simple sign outside a meeting place that says ‘A.A. meeting tonight’; listing in local phone directories; distribution of A.A. literature; and radio and television shows using sophisticated media techniques. Whatever the form, it comes down to ‘one drunk carrying the message to another drunk,’ whether through personal contact or through the use of third parties and the media.

Self-support—In keeping with our Seventh Tradition, A.A. pays its own expenses and this also applies in cyberspace. To avoid confusion and to guard against the perception of affiliation, endorsement or promotion, care should be taken in selection of the Web site host. Web site committees have avoided any host site that requires the inclusion of mandatory advertising space or links to commercial sites.

Non-affiliation, non-endorsement—Linking to other A.A. Web sites will often have the positive effect of significantly broadening the scope of a site. However, even when linking to another A.A. site, care must be exercised since each A.A. entity is autonomous, has its own group conscience, and may display information that another A.A. group conscience might find objectionable. There is no way to know when this might occur. Experience indicates that linking to non-A.A. sites is even more problematic.

Not only are they much more likely to display non-A.A. and/or controversial material, but linking might imply endorsement, if not affiliation. In the final analysis, experience strongly suggests that, when considering linking to another site, proceed with caution.

The same caution is advised when choosing a Web hosting site. Many “free” Web hosting services require that the Web site include mandatory advertisements or links. Most A.A. Web site committees see this as actual or implied affiliation or endorsement of the products or services listed in those ads. They have found it prudent to create a Web site through a service that does not include mandatory advertisements or links.

It is suggested that the Web site by confining its links to known A.A. service entities and by incorporating a mandatory exit statement when someone wishes to activate the outside links on the site. (This statement also covers access to application software such as Adobe Reader, which is provided to assist visitors in reading Portable Document Format (PDF) files.)

“PRIVATE” SECTIONS

The Australian General Service Office has heard of some districts and areas that have designated certain parts of their Web sites as “private,” which require the use of usernames and passwords to gain entrance. In some instances, the only requirement to receive a username and password is to state to the Web master or another trusted servant that you are an A.A. member. In other cases, access is only available to those holding specific service positions. Web site committees that are considering creating password-protected sections of their Web sites may wish to consider: what content is private and what is public; who will be given access to the private information, and how; and how usernames and passwords will be communicated, stored and/or maintained. Some Web sites use these private sections to change or update meeting information or trusted servant contact information. When giving the ability to a service worker to change content on a Web site or database, committees may wish to proceed with care. Members with the ability to change content may need training on the software used, and the committee may want to designate someone to review the data for accuracy.

To date, the General Service Office has not heard of any major problems regarding non-A.A.s retrieving confidential A.A. information from these private sections. However, Web site committees may wish to discuss how they will safeguard confidential A.A. information, and how to avoid a breach in security.

A.A.’s shared experience thus far is that some A.A. members feel comfortable using their full names and giving personal contact information on a password-protected A.A. Web site. However, other members are less comfortable providing this information for communication purposes, even for a password-protected site. Committees usually exercise care in helping members learn about new modes of communication, and continue to offer members the option of receiving A.A. correspondence by mail if preferred.

GUARDING ANONYMITY ONLINE

Modern communication in A.A. is flowing from one alcoholic to another in ways that are high-tech, relatively open-ended and evolving quickly. Protecting anonymity is a major concern for members, who are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers.

A guiding resource of shared A.A. experience regarding Web sites is the G.S.O. service piece “Frequently Asked Questions About A.A. Web Sites,” question seven:

Q. What about anonymity?

We observe all A.A.’s principles and Traditions on our Web sites. Since anonymity is “the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions,” we practice anonymity on A.A. Web sites at all times. An A.A. Web site is a public medium, which has the potential for reaching the broadest possible audience and, therefore, requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film.

GENERAL SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES

MySpace, Facebook and other social networking Web sites are public in nature. Though users create accounts and utilize usernames and passwords, once on the site, it is a public medium where A.A. members and non-A.A.s mingle.

As long as individuals do not identify themselves as A.A. members, there is no conflict of interest. However, someone using their full name and / or a likeness, such as a full-face photograph, would be contrary to the spirit of the Eleventh Tradition, which states in the Long Form that, “... our [last] names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed or publicly printed.” Experience suggests that it is in keeping with the Eleventh Tradition not to disclose A.A. membership on social networking sites as well as on any other Web site, blog, electronic bulletin board, etc., that is not composed solely of A.A. members, is not password protected or is accessible to the public.

POSTING SERVICE MINUTES AND REPORTS

Deciding what contents to post on public Web sites requires careful consideration. As it is helpful when Web sites make minutes of meetings, reports and background material readily available to a broad population, it is also paramount to keep in mind that these documents may be posted in a public medium. Each document needs to be reviewed and edited to insure that the full names of A.A. members are not included. Some committees have one version of minutes for A.A. members only, which includes full names and personal phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and a second version of the report that omits names and personal contact information so that minutes can be placed on the committee’s public Web site. In addition to local A.A. members, please remember that the following individuals are A.A. members and that their full names and photographs should not appear in publicly posted reports or on publicly posted flyers:

Class B (alcoholic) General Service Board Trustees and General Service Office staff members

If there is any doubt about placing a person’s full name in a report, it would be best to ask permission first.

Some committees may find it perfectly acceptable to post full names and personal contact information on a password-protected Web site meant for A.A. members only. This will be up to the informed group conscience to decide.

SPEAKER TALKS ONLINE

Members report that audio files of A.A. talks increasingly are being disseminated over the Internet. If a member objects to having his or her A.A. story broadcast publicly, he or she may wish to contact the site's Web master and request its removal. Numerous members have acted, with good outcomes, on the following suggestion for speakers at A.A. events that appears in the G.S.O. service piece A.A. Guidelines for Conferences, Conventions and Roundups:

Experience shows that it is best to encourage speakers not to use full names and not to identify third parties by full names in their talks. The strength of our Anonymity Traditions is reinforced by speakers who do not use their last names and by taping companies whose labels and catalogs do not identify speakers by last names, titles, service jobs or descriptions.

In addition, some A.A. members, if being recorded for future play on a public Web site, may choose to leave out other details of their lives that may make themselves or their families identifiable.

PERSONAL PHONE NUMBERS ON A.A. EVENT FLYERS

Until relatively recently, A.A. members usually had little concern about placing their first names, last initials and personal phone numbers on flyers announcing upcoming A.A. events, since these flyers were typically given out only in A.A. meetings, left on tables at other A.A. events or distributed to members. Today, event flyers can be easily uploaded and viewed on Web sites, accessible to the general public.

Due to search services on the Internet, it is now possible to utilize phone numbers to find out a person's identity, including full names and, possibly, other personal information. If A.A. members become increasingly uneasy with personal phone numbers being placed on flyers, event committees may need to look into alternate ways of providing contact information such as an event e-mail address.

ANONYMITY AND E-MAIL

Electronic mail is a widely used and accepted method of communication. It is now used regularly as a service tool in A.A., but as with any service, we need to ensure the Fellowship's Traditions are maintained while still receiving the most benefit from this form of communication. When using e-mail it is necessary to consider the anonymity of the recipients of messages. Sending messages to multiple recipients that disclose the e-mail addresses of everyone on the addressee list is a potential break of someone else's anonymity. Therefore, it is a good idea to obtain a recipient's explicit permission before using his or her e-mail address for A.A. correspondence, especially if it is a workplace email address.

When sending A.A. mail to multiple recipients who wish to remain anonymous, use can be made of the BCC (Blind Courtesy Copy) option available on most computers.

USING FULL NAMES IN E-MAILS TO PROFESSIONALS

It is suggested that e-mail communication with professionals is similar to a letter-mailing project with two caveats:

- 1) e-mails can easily be forwarded, and
- 2) the contents of e-mails can easily be cut-and-pasted, changed and/or uploaded to Web sites.
- 3) Professional “friends of A.A.” have shared that, for the purposes of Professional Awareness (PA) or Public Information (PI) service, it lends credibility to the letter or e-mail if a full name is used and if the letter or e-mail has a professional look and feel. The Public Information coordinator at the New York G.S.O. responds to e-mail and letter requests from the media with the following signature:

Sincerely,

John Doe (name not for publication)

Coordinator of Public Information

ANONYMITY ON PERSONAL COMPUTERS

Some A.A.s think, “I have my own computer, so I have nothing to fear about the anonymity of A.A.s in my address book.” However, it is possible that a motivated individual could obtain a username and password to access another person’s e-mail account. Hopefully, such an intrusion would not occur, but it may be prudent to select a password that is as unique as possible and to keep the password private.

Even the most guarded e-mail account could be “hacked” by a computer expert, but at this point we find that many A.A. members and committees are willing to take this risk, all the while utilizing prudence and good common sense.

We may also want to consider that e-mail address books used for A.A. correspondence on a home personal computer, Macintosh, laptop, PDA, Blackberry, etc., may be available to friends and family if more than one person uses the device.

E-MAIL IN A.A.— ACCESS, ADDRESSES AND ROTATION

It is not necessary to own a personal computer or laptop to utilize e-mail. Many A.A. members in service who do not have computers use free e-mail services to obtain an e-mail account and specifically designate it as their A.A. e-mail service. A.A. members can check their e-mail accounts at public libraries, Internet cafes, and anywhere else Internet service is available.

For A.A. service positions, generic e-mail addresses can be passed from one trusted servant to another at rotation time. For example, the sample e-mail address and account for “delegate@area_e_easternregion.com.au” could, upon rotation, be passed on, maintaining the e-mail address identity for the position, one rotation to the next.

THE DANGERS OF SPAM

It is up to a committee's informed group conscience to determine how best to approach service projects via the Internet, especially regarding PA or PI projects. It is strongly suggested that A.A. members not send bulk unsolicited e-mail messages for A.A. service, i.e., e-mail "mail shots." By doing so they could be bringing the A.A. name into public controversy and damaging the reputation of A.A. as a whole. It may also be illegal, so get informed on the local and federal laws pertaining to e-mail communication and spam. Instead, the committee could discuss the possibility of sending A.A. correspondence to a small number of recipients or sending personalized e-mails one at a time. E-mails may be filtered into a recipient's spam account so an alternative follow-up plan should also be in place in case there is no initial response. In addition to A.A. members continuing to make personal contacts, an effective route for interacting with professionals and the public has been to provide the link to General Service Office's A.A. Web site. (www.aa.org.au)