

FM on the Web

Over the past decade, FM has made more and more use of web technology. But like the sector itself, there's still plenty of room for fresh and effective development. David Emanuel offers some advice.

WHEN WE LAUNCHED i-FM ten years ago, we had the bold idea - backed with a slightly foolhardy confidence - that facilities management was ready and even eager for bang-up-to-date market news and information...the kind of service that could only be delivered via the internet. It seems amazing now, but in the '90s email was still cementing its position as a platform for business communication and the idea of the internet being a viable, let alone indispensable, business tool aroused more than a little scepticism in many quarters.

Things have certainly come a long way since then. Now, if you don't have a decent web presence, you pretty much don't exist. Establishing email facilities and a website are right at the top of the list of must-do items for every new venture, whether that's a new business or a new free-standing initiative from an existing business. And buyers use the web to check credentials of potential supply partners, often before they do anything else.

Internet technology has become the FM's key to efficiency, productivity, better customer servicing and much more while at the same time that it has, arguably, become the industry's primary means of communication. But are FM websites good enough? Are they the robust, effective tools they need to be in this dynamic and very competitive marketplace?

Our regular surveys of frontline FMs have found over the years a steady increase in the proportion who use the web as a key information source. In this year's study, over two-thirds said they do –

exceeded only by everyone's favourite source of advice, personal recommendation.

Will anyone who wants to find out about you or your business on the web find you quickly and easily? Will they see what you want them to see? If they search on, say, facilities management or facilities services, will you be there somewhere near the top of the list? A weak site won't do you any favours; but a great site won't do much for your

business either if no one visits it.

How do you increase the number of visitors?

● **Advertising** – Banner ads have become an essential component to any advertising strategy. These are highly cost-effective and easy to do. They catch the eye and the interest, then carry the visitor through a single click from the host's site to your own. They have proven effective in a wide range of industries, yet are still not used nearly enough in FM.

● **Links** – Building in links from key industry sites or from key business partners to your own will also help to generate visitors. Be selective, though, in order to be 'seen in the right places'.

● **Search engine optimisation** – Many regard this as a 'dark art'. Fundamentally, it's about building in relevant search terms on the pages of a site so that search engines such as Google and Yahoo find you fast when someone types in 'FM consultancy', for example. Regular updating of content and relevant links also figure in optimisation. A bit of advice on this topic will almost certainly be worth the cost. One has only to look at how poorly ranked many FM sites are to see that more work should be done here.

● **Email** – New web technologies are brilliant at sending out tailored email to customers or business partners, driving them to websites for more information on services, news updates, advice and guidance or even action on special offers. Are you being pro-active in promoting your site? If you are not, that's the equivalent of printing a brochure and then leaving it boxed up in a corner of the office. The trick is to make the email attractive, timely and sufficiently powerful to drive the next step.

● **Press releases** – as above, though it's worth bearing in mind there's an extra hurdle here in that your audience may be what some might describe as 'jaded'.

● **Content** – Websites are all about content and function. That design should be fresh and navigation should be clear and easy to use goes without saying. Beyond that, content that is regularly updated will help keep the site alive and attractive. News, awards, case studies, commentary, position papers, advice – if kept current will all draw visitors to your site on a regular basis. In contrast, no one comes back to a site that is clearly gathering dust.

The 2009 Marketing Trends Survey, published over the summer by the Chartered Institute of Marketing, found that email is now the third most widely used marketing tool, behind PR and branding exercises. Email also ranked a solid third in terms of return on investment. But has

e-commerce that works – HSS stuck with its plan to fill a gap in the market despite a deteriorating economy www.hsslivehire.com



anyone seen a focused email campaign in the FM sector? I know I haven't.

There are lots of ways to have a website built these days. The choice ranges from the 'home-grown' (with an upside of low cost and a downside of possible limited technological knowledge and application experience) to the big agency (with the upside of extensive technical resources and the downside of high cost). The best strategy, as so often, lies in finding a solution somewhere in between those extremes – and, critically, a service provider that understands your business, your markets and your needs and aspirations for your site.

As a part of making that decision, consider who will actually run the site once it is created. I would argue that the best answer is you, not the design firm. You use a specialist contractor to fit-out your offices, but you don't call them in to manage the space or empty the bins. Routine maintenance, adjustments, updates are best handled with you in control of timing, pace and appearance.

One final point on the subject of site design. In the early days when the old Netscape browser dominated web use, ensuring that sites appeared to visitors as intended was pretty straightforward. Now, though Internet Explorer is the dominant browser, you cannot take for granted that your initial site design will work properly – or even work at all – for all would-be visitors. IE 8 is the current release, but many PCs continue to use IE 7. Some companies are still on IE 6. Sites must be designed to be compatible with each of these.

And of course there are other browsers to take into consideration, Firefox and Google Chrome being the two most obvious. There is a parallel challenge lying in the various generations of the Windows operating system that are in use across both commercial and home applications; and the steadily growing demand for web access via PDAs and mobile phones adds another complication.

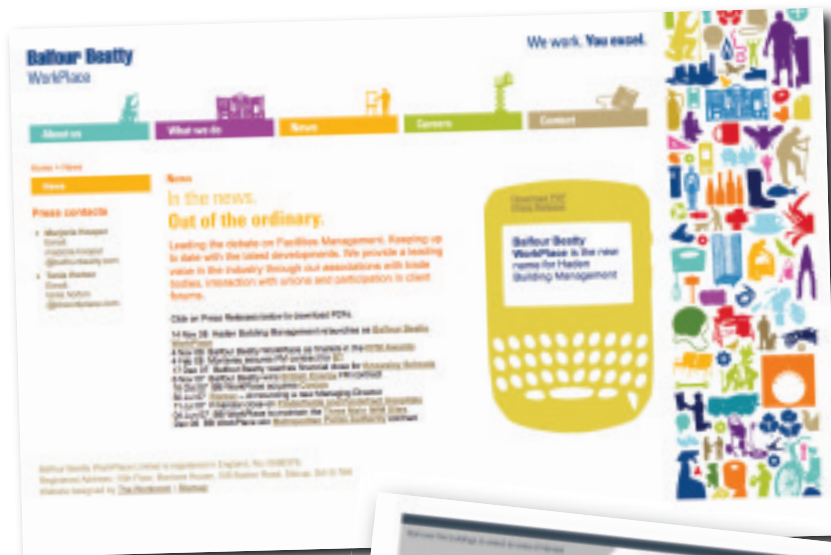
All this means that site designs need a lot of checking and testing to ensure they work properly, regardless of the visitor's starting point.

HSS LiveHire is basically an e-commerce site, a function that is only relevant to a specific sub-set of the facilities sector. But there are a couple of points worth making about this venture that are definitely relevant across the whole sector.

● **Opportunity:** HSS spotted a gap in the market, explored it and developed a solution that meets buyers' needs and simultaneously makes it easier for them to do business with the supplier.

● **Commitment:** It kicked off with initial research before the UK slumped into recession, the service was developed and implemented despite wider economic pressures because the company believed it would both foster new business and set it apart from its competitors.

HSS says it is finding success on the former, and it has certainly achieved a clear lead on the latter. To introduce and promote LiveHire, the company produced a five-minute video which is accessible via its website and on memory sticks it hands out to potential users. This explains the purpose and value of the system, then walks the viewer through the process step-by-step, highlighting features and benefits along the way. Though very slick in appearance, this video was relatively inexpensive to develop: it is mainly a



collection of screenshots from the site with a voice-over provided by a suitably talented HSS employee.

Atkins has also made good use of the web recently, launching a mini-site that explains and illustrates exactly what its Asset Management business does. Using sophisticated animated graphics, this new site provides a simple – but nevertheless clear and strong – explanation of both the services and the approach the business brings to its clients. It's also worth noting that the Atkins mini-site complements a growing portfolio of web-based applications that the company uses to promote and deliver its services. These range from the specific – for example, a purpose-built intranet-based visitor verification system – to the general – such as guidance on sustainability policy development and implementation in e-book form.

Even the traditional publishing world is not immune to the impact of new technology, of course. The various magazines in our sector are all moving ahead with developments in their own web presence. Initially, trade press websites functioned mainly as 'shop windows', enabling the magazine to set out its 'wares' in terms of sector coverage, editorial stance, planned features and, especially, advertising opportunities. Later, additional useful stuff was added – for example, PFM's site has long included access to its fortnightly FM Reports, details of the Partnership Awards and access to archived feature articles. The most recent development is inclusion of a WYSIWYG flip-book capturing the latest product in its entirety. Hard-pressed publishing house Financial Directors are probably now wondering if they need to go down the traditional print route at all...but perhaps that, too, is the subject of another article.

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(Top) Out of the ordinary, maybe. Out of date, definitely. Why have a 'news' page if you have no news? www.balfourbeatty.com; (above) Mini-site, maxi impact – animation reinforces the message on a purposely 'lightweight' corporate site www.atkinsglobal.com

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