

Redeveloping the Vermont Folklife Center's Website

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Introduction

The Vermont Folklife Center website had been little changed since 2002. By 2016 it became clear that we could no longer put off an overhaul of our primary online presence, which had become aged in both design and technology, and sprawling and Byzantine in its architecture. Inspired by VFC Director of Education Kathleen Haughey's work in fall 2015 to redevelop the website of our school-based education program, Discovering Community (www.discoveringcommunity.org), VFC staff begin to investigate in earnest our options for reinventing our online portal. Staff consensus was that while much of the content of the old site still held value, the aesthetics and information architecture reflected poorly on VFC.

Challenges

Our efforts to recreate our website faced multiple challenges, including: limited funding; thirteen years of accumulated legacy content; several competing (and outmoded) design templates; and a chaotic and user-unfriendly site architecture.

Goals:

Our goals for the project included the creation of a contemporary, user-friendly, media-rich online presence for VFC that would showcase the nature and quality of our work; managing a web project within a limited budget; maintaining access to our archival databases; developing the new site using a technology that would allow any staff member (and not just the Archivist) to update content.

Considerations

Staff formed a committee (Pod in our parlance) to oversee the process of selecting a platform and redeveloping the site. The original VFC site was built primarily in HTML and PHP with many navigation menus delivered using outmoded server side includes. In addition the site also included multiple Flash media players and small Flash-based elements scattered across it. Several sections of the site were built using WordPress, and we maintain multiple PHP/MySQL archival databases.

Our decision making process was informed by the following considerations:

- Back-end Content Management System (CMS) to facilitate content updates
- Template-based design
- Continued access to legacy content

- Local designer/developer
- Cost

CMS

Since 2002 only one staff member, Archivist Andy Kolovos, has had the necessary skills to update content on the HTML/PHP-based sections site. This sole responsibility was burdensome and resulted in bottlenecks in completing updates/changes to site content. The Pod identified a back-end CMS as a necessary element of a redeveloped VFC site so that responsibility for updating site content could be share by multiple staff members.

Design Templates

Our past experience with WordPress exposed us to the use of design templates that could be customized if necessary and eventually replaced with relative simplicity. The Pod felt the use of a web technology that would allow for such templates to be a means of simplifying--and therefore speeding up and lowering the cost of --the redesign process.

Legacy Content

Any new site platform would have to allow for the easy transfer of old site content to the new platform and allow for continued access to archival databases and other discrete elements of the site.

Local Designer/Developer

Staff felt it crucial to work with a designer/developer with whom we could meet in person and who would be responsive to the needs of a local client.

Cost

Due to organizational budgetary constraints cost for the redevelopment needed to be kept as low as possible while still achieving our desired results. Cost (or potential costs) of ongoing support were a component of this element.

After establishing these priorities, the staff Pod then examined several options for moving forward with the project.

Options

A review of available web-technology resulted in the selection of two options for us to explore in greater detail: WordPress and SquareSpace.

WordPress

Having worked with WordPress (WP) sites in the past our initial impulse was to redevelop the VFC site using WP. One of the most attractive features of WP is the open-source nature of the software and that our current web hosting company supports simple install of WP on the domains they host. We reviewed the use of WP in light of our outlined criteria:

CMS:

Pro: One of the primary virtues of WP is its CMS function.

Con: Several of our staff find the WP CMS difficult to use and counterintuitive

Design Templates:

Pro: Design templates are central to WP. There are many options for templates, both free and at available at modest cost. WP template customization is common.

Con: Our experience has shown that ongoing support for templates by their designers or developers is inconsistent and that templates often break in response to necessary updates to WP software.

Legacy Content:

Pro: Cut and paste process to move text. Images moved easily. Integration of other legacy content (WP installations and MySQL-based databases) seamless.

Con: Work involved in moving content.

Local Designer/Developer

Pro: Many local developers/designers available

Con: Costs

Cost

Pro: In general, costs for web design/development have dropped since our last major web projects. RFP were submitted to several different designers.

Con: Cost of working with WP significantly higher than hoped. Ongoing costs associated with necessary upgrades, repairs and support. Limited VFC resources.

SquareSpace

SquareSpace (SS) is a relative newcomer into the CMS/hosting field. SS is a proprietary platform for hosting websites. Their current pricing model involves flat-fee hosting and ongoing support billed monthly or annually. SquareSpace is a CMS and site hosting environment, requiring that a domain be hosted at SS. We reviewed SS in light of our criteria.

CMS:

Pro: Several staff members prefer SS CMS to that of WP

Con: Proprietary nature of SS

Design Templates:

Pro: Design templates are central to SS. There are many options for templates, and SS templates can be modified within certain limitations. SS maintains templates. SS software upgrades have little impact on template functionality and viability.

Con: Limited customization of SS templates.

Legacy Content

Pro: Cut and paste process to move text. Images moved easily.

Con: Work involved in moving content. SS servers will not allow for hosting of WP or MySQL. Use of sub-domains necessary to maintain access to this content on organizational domain.

Local Designer/Developer

Pro: Local developers/designers available.

Con: Smaller pool of developers/designers compared to WP

Cost

Pro: In general, costs for web design and development have dropped since our last major web projects. RFP were submitted to several different designers. Lower cost than any quote to develop in WP.

Con: Limited resources available at VFC.

Decisions

The Website Pod examined the Pros and Cons of both options, ultimately deciding to redevelop the VFC website using SquareSpace. Our rationale for selecting SquareSpace over WordPress was rooted in the following considerations. Although the staff would have greatly preferred to use an open source option, in the end we felt that ease of use of SS tipped the balance in its favor.

Ease of Use

In our discussions, key staff members found the SS CMS interface friendlier and more intuitive than that of WP. Knowing the limited technical abilities of many of our staff members, and the need to distribute the responsibility to update content amongst the staff members, the perceived greater simplicity of the SS CMS became an increasingly important factor informing our decision.

Additionally, we recognized that WP requires staying abreast of, and implementing, software updates (a necessity with WP), and the need to coordinate any required template maintenance and updates with an outside developer. Using Squarespace, at least according to plan, these aspects of site functionality would be undertaken as a part of our contract and handled internally by SS--with little or no direct involvement from VFC.

Cost

The quoted cost from the designer/developer was substantially lower than those submitted for developing in WP.

We anticipate that the annual fees associated with SS will not exceed the potential costs of paying for an outside developer to maintain, update and repair a WP installation.

Known Drawbacks

Because SS is hosted within its own walled garden, and because SS does not support MySQL databases or WP, we needed to identify a work around that would allow us to continue to provide access to these resources under the vermontfolklifecenter.org domain.

Standard procedure in these cases is to host databases on separate servers and provided access to them under a subdomain. For our purposes we selected the subdomain explore.vermontfolklifecenter.org.

Overview of the Re-Development Process

As with any web design, or re-design process—starting with clearly articulated goals for the organization and the end-user is key. Prior to selecting the Squarespace platform, our team of

VFC staff met regularly for 4–6 weeks to discuss these goals. Once we had a firm handle on what we wanted to accomplish with the site—both internally and externally—it was much easier for us to evaluate what content and functionality to migrate from our existing site, along with what new content and functionality we wanted to build into the redesigned site.

With clarity around goals, content, and functionality—we were then in a position to evaluate platform options—which in this case came down to Wordpress and Squarespace. To oversimplify the comparison—or better, to highlight the differences that were most important to us—our decision came down to choosing between the added customization capability of Wordpress versus the simpler user interface and direct technical support offered by Squarespace.

We determined, based on our goals, content, and functionality—that we could achieve all of these things in Squarespace—and what we'd be sacrificing in terms of customization, we would get back in user accessibility—i.e., the ability of any staff member to feel comfortable adding/managing content on the platform. Without a dedicated web/communications staff member, this ability to share content management was a key strategy for us.

Now at the end of the process, the customization limitations—of which there were almost none—proved to be a fantastic tradeoff for a platform that is organized, well supported, and easy to use.

Role of the Consultant

An essential element of this success was our partnership with a Squarespace developer—Dan Kirk—who provided the following crucial technical services: (1) helped introduce our team to the platform, (2) provided design/functionality support for the selection of the Squarespace theme, and beyond, (3) migrated legacy content and supported staff in uploading new content, (4) managed technical components of site domain migrations and launch, (5) served as an intermediary between the VFC and a web coding developer to customize the theme in key ways that were beyond the Squarespace “out of the box” themes, and (6) provided detailed instructions for adding certain types of content that VFC staff will use in an ongoing manner once the final build is complete.

The VFC identified all the legacy content that was to be moved to the new site. Dan Kirk migrated all of the content—including building the site architecture to support it. The migration involved design/aesthetic consideration as well—as Kirk at times needed to mimic design and functionality from the existing site, using tools/widgets in Squarespace that were not identical. For example, our Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program web pages showcased past project and video features that were custom built/coded. Kirk was able to design the same aesthetic and functionality using the available tools in Squarespace.

Squarespace themes are modest in terms of design complexity across the board—they flourish with strong visual assets (i.e. photographs, video, etc)—which the VFC is fortunate to have.

Additionally, Squarespace employs a “summary” widget tool, that effectively allows any piece of posted content on the site to be displayed in a sortable, searchable, or scrollable thumbnail box. This was especially important for us, as posted content often falls in various categories—for example, a fieldwork research project might result in an exhibition, which then has unique media assets. The “summary” function allows for a single entry to be visible to a viewer in the “Fieldwork/Research”, “Exhibitions”, and “Media” sections simultaneously—without redundant posting. The feature is achieved through the use of categories and tags on posts that can be used to determine which items are displayed in which “summaries.”

Additionally, Squarespace includes “out of the box” widgets to easily host photos, audio, and video—with multiple styles and options for presentation that can be changed even after the content has been posted.

We were able to accomplish 98% of the site functionality using stock Squarespace tools and widgets. We employed the services of a hard code developer to custom build two page banners features—one more dynamically functioning slideshow banner, and a second that incorporated a fading effect as the user scrolls down the page.

Squarespace is an extremely powerful tool despite the limitations of having to use set themes and built-in content tools. There is more flexibility to move between design elements in the different themes than first may seem possible—however, there are also limitations that require hard coding to accomplish. In some ways, Squarespace’s greatest strength is in what it doesn’t allow you to do—the design themes and tools have been carefully selected to present and function well regardless of how they are used—in other words, it’s difficult to build a page that looks and functions poorly. That being said, contracting with Dan Kirk opened up greater possibilities for us in terms of design and functionality and allowed us to accomplish more, in a shorter period of time, than we would have been able to do on our own.

Conclusion

Time will tell if SquareSpace fulfils our needs over the long term, but VFC staff members feel our assessment process was thorough, and the results were achievable on a timetable that suited our needs, and at a cost that fit within our limited means. SquareSpace is certainly not ideal for every organization, and this document should not be seen as advocating for the use of SquareSpace within the folklore studies/folk arts/folklife communities. Rather it explains our rationale for selecting the platform and the process we went through to develop our new site.

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