

TRB Web Site Best Practices

The following are some recommendations for improving the usability of TRB committee web sites based on observations of current web sites.

1) Some of the links on TRB's Web page that lists the standing committees are broken.

RECOMMENDATION: Make sure there is a process for reviewing links. Web authoring tools, like Dream Weaver, can be used to automatically check for broken links or someone can be assigned to check this. Those that are broken should be quickly fixed and those that are no longer current should be removed.

RECOMMENDATION: Include a link on web pages to the webmaster so that problems can be reported.

2) Menus are not consistent.

- They take different forms on different pages of the web site.
- They bounce from side to side.
- They provide different choices on different pages
- They are often on the side, on the top or in both places
- Some place timely information at the top and relatively constant information at the bottom and others do the opposite.

RECOMMENDATION: Style the web pages so the user can always look in the same place for the same information. Keep menu locations consistent and content consistent. Avoid duplicate menu options on the same page. Develop each page of a web site to consistently display menus from page to page. This could be accomplished by establishing a common template using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) or a Content Management System (CMS).

Note: Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) can be used to standardize page elements. For example, a site that is set up with CSS would have an identical title, header, footer, and side menu on every page. A Content Management System (CMS) is similar to a CSS site, but each page element is an item in a database. Text on the site may be updated by updating the database item that provides the text item to that page, allowing universal updates to be made with ease. (Using CSS, one changes the template html files, which tends to require more html coding.) Setting up a CMS is more demanding than creating a CSS site, but it is easier to update after it is up and running. Use of either method creates a site that can be consistent across pages, and eliminates the problems noted above.

3) There is no consistent web site naming convention.

RECOMMENDATION: TRB could purchase a domain name to promote consistent naming conventions. For example, the AHB web sites could be www.ahb.org/40 and www.ahb.org/45 and so on. To make it easier for those not familiar with the TRB

naming convention to find the committee that they are interested in, a descriptive name could also be used. For example, www.ahb.org/freewayops or www.ahb.org/accessmanagement

4) Some web sites do not reference TRB and provide no explanation of how the committee fits into the TRB organization or helps accomplish the TRB mission.

RECOMMENDATION: Link committee web pages to the location of information on the TRB web page, where appropriate, such as TRB purpose and mission.

Note: A recent court case has resulted in concern over the use of organizational logos or letter heads and the endorsement that use implies. So the TRB logo and letterhead should not be included on committee web sites. Committee Web sites should use the disclaimer that is available at:

<http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/archive/committees/web/web-logo.gif>

5) Graphics and icons sometimes work and sometimes they don't.

RECOMMENDATION: See recommendations for menus under item 2.

6) Some web pages are very complex with business logos, streaming media, etc.

RECOMMENDATION: TRB should recommend a standard, modifiable template for web pages. TRB could also mention some web authoring software that could be used with this template. There is shareware for web authoring that uses simple html but documentation and support for this may be difficult to obtain. Web authoring software isn't usually too expensive, and may be a better approach, especially for individuals who may not have much experience with web authoring, html coding, and web jargon.

RECENT TRB ACTIONS:

- 1) TRB has asked each standing committee and task force to appoint a Communications Coordinator. The person appointed will work with TRB staff and the other committees to enhance the ability to apply the plethora of tools available to communicate with committee Members, Friends and others. The Communications Coordinator will be a committee's gateway to receiving and sharing tools and tips through periodic conference calls, webinars, emails, and/or shared websites with TRB staff and other committees.
- 2) TRB is planning to make the Google Sites platform available for committee web sites. Mark Norman should be sending a letter explaining this to committee chairs. TRB will be hosting a Webinar in September or October on Web sites and the use of Google Sites. (see <http://sites.google.com/site/trbcommittea1111/>)

SOME EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES:

- 1) Several committees, including Regional Transportation Systems Management and Operations (AHB10), Freeway Operations (AHB20), HOV, HOT and

Managed Lanes Committee (AHB35), and Traffic Flow Theory and Characteristics (AHB45) have Web sites that include the following:

- a. Members name and organizational affiliation
- b. A list of permanent subcommittees
- c. Committee documents (meeting agendas, minutes, etc.)

- 2) The best example of a committee Web site is the Access Management Committee's (AHB70). The opening page provides the Mission Statement, Committee Scope, current members, emeritus members, subcommittees and, what is probably the best feature, a full-page discussion of ways to get involved. An information page provides a menu of material on upcoming conferences, conference flyers, calls for papers or abstracts, and proceedings from previous conferences. The Web site is probably THE go to site for information on what is happening in access management. The Web site is innovative in its listing of sponsors, with different levels of sponsorship, for various Committee activities.