FIVE LESSONS FROM A DEVELOPMENT WEBSITE OVERHAUL

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This post is written by Kristin Hanson, Senior Associate Director, Office of Communications at Johns Hopkins Development & Alumni Relations.

About one year ago we took first steps toward the creation of the new Johns Hopkins enterprise-wide giving website. Our eight-year campaign was ending, and our five-year-old site was showing its age, so there was ample impetus for change. Almost 11 months later our sites — two, not one — launched. The road, unsurprisingly, wasn't straight, and we picked up some valuable knowledge along the way. Here are five lessons we learned that will guide us — and, hopefully, you — in future web overhaul adventures.

1. Don't take shortcuts. Do an RFP.

We anticipated a short timeline for our site's development and launch, so we chose a firm that we'd worked with previously on a digital campaign progress report. We thought the new site would incorporate similar elements and assumed "better the devil you know." Ultimately, that rationale didn't hold. We had a year to develop the sites, both of which differed significantly from the progress report, and we were underwhelmed with some of the service we received. Would going through the RFP process have resulted in better sites and a different level of service? I can't say, but we'll definitely do an RFP next time.

2. Have a clear understanding of your boundaries to keep your agency's proposals reasonable.

At our research and discovery meeting, our agency presented a number of ideas that looked and sounded great — but that we knew would be non-starters with our executive leadership. They couldn't have known intuitively what "general" digital best practices and innovations would be permissible and which wouldn't. We should have given clearer indications of where the boundaries stood so they could have provided more actionable recommendations from the earliest possible part of the project.

3. Consider the human capital required for maintenance at every step.

Many of the ideas the agency provided would have required a level of human resource support — to produce photography, video, and written copy — that we simply don't have. Before committing to an information architecture, we looked at what updating we could comfortably achieve and used that knowledge to guide our agency in creating the appropriate spaces on our sites. We're confident we have sites we can maintain at a high-quality level, rather than feeling overwhelmed by a need to find any content possible to keep them fresh.

4. Allot more time than you think you need to get feedback from leadership.

Executive leaders face many demands on their time, and ours were no different. Competing priorities arose as our campaign was closing, so we couldn't make a final presentation of the sites to our executive team until just before the tentative launch date. The revisions they suggested were minor but still required us to delay the launch and incur some additional costs. In retrospect, we could have pushed harder and earlier for time with our executive team. Alternatively, we could have set an expectation for a launch a few weeks after the campaign-closing events, ensuring more time to make changes at the end of the site development process.

5. Have data on hand to defend every decision, from information architecture (IA) to word count per page.

Why were those late edits relatively minor? We had data backing every decision we made a succinct, business-process-focused answer for every question they had, including:

- Why did we get rid of all but one piece of editorial content on the home page? Analytics on our old site showed users didn't click on it.

Why move annual giving and gift planning to more prominent locations in the navigation and on the home page? Analytics showed that this content was used most, so we made it easier for visitors to find it. Our sites went live in late October, and although we encountered bumps along the way, we're happy with the overall look and flexibility they offer. We invite you to visit our campaign impact site at https://impact.jhu.edu and new enterprise giving site at https://giving.jhu.edu.