

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Editors reveal their approaches to their websites

by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

Last time in this space, I offered tips for creating a website (see [April–May 2011 issue of Copyediting](#)). This time, I provide insights into how several copyeditors approached the project.

DIY or outside help?

Creating a website is a technical task, and many editors are uncomfortable with tackling such a do-it-yourself project. However, there are several options.

You may be able to teach yourself site design, which is what **Mary Ellen Schutz** did. She created “a very, very simple site, using Microsoft Publisher,” she said. That may not be the leading-edge, technologically best web-design tool, but it got the job done for her.

Carolyn Haley “applied skills gained from page layout and word-processing experience” and used WordPress “after driving myself to tears trying to self-teach Dreamweaver and its ilk.” (Dreamweaver is the leading-edge site-design program, but it is quite complex and not easy to learn.)

If you’re an early adopter like **Helen (Glenn) Court**, you can develop expertise “along the way” without formal training. “One doesn’t start off an expert, and certainly not in a specialty as evolutionary as web design,” she said. “Training is largely a matter of studying other sites.” Design, she said, cannot be taught but is “an innate gift.”

If you have the skill and the will to do so, you can design and build your site yourself. **Dick Margulis** had both, thanks to a previous salaried job. Creating his site, he noted, “involved some basic reading to learn enough HTML to be dangerous, poking around the Internet for how-to sites, pestering coworkers who were full-time web developers, looking at source code on sites I liked, and eventually developing a few sites on my own.”

Margulis invoked his networking skills as he built up his site-design expertise: “By posting queries to lists, I was able to pick the brains of more experienced site designers when something didn’t validate properly,” he said.

Those who prefer not to do it themselves can hire a designer and a programmer, as did **Rich Adin**, because his site is “much too complex for me to do myself.” Hiring the work out freed him to focus on his business while the site was under development.

Finally, you could go both ways. You can work with a friend or colleague to design a website initially or later in the process to improve it in terms of technology, design, and/or functionality. **April Michelle Davis** started with a colleague’s help originally and later hired a branding expert to redesign the site and create some other products, “all with the same look and feel, to help build my brand,” while **Katharine O’Moore-Klopf** created the original version of her website herself with no formal training and later hired “web designer extraordinaire and editorial jill-of-all-trades” Court to revamp the site.

“I bought some books on HTML and played around with FrontPage, making every mistake possible as I learned,”

O’Moore-Klopf recalled. “My site didn’t have a professionally designed logo—I just composed it with type in a simple art program. The design wasn’t the most attractive, and it sure didn’t scream ‘Professional!’—but it got my name out there.” She may do another update soon because “we believe that a site’s design should not remain the same for too long, or it will begin to look outdated, because tastes in website design change over time.”

For editors who decide to hire website designers, one debate involves whether to use someone local or someone virtual. As these colleagues imply, that comes down to personal preference—someone you interact with by phone and e-mail can be as effective as someone you meet with in person. Before committing to a designer, though, treat the process the way clients treat hiring freelance editors: Ask for references and work samples, whether the designer can help you do updates, and whether you can structure payment in increments. Expect to need and pay (or barter) for 10 to 100 hours of work on the design and technical underpinning, and establish a schedule for the project.

Staying up to date

Keeping a site up to date is vital to its credibility and effectiveness; it also helps keep a site visible in browser searches or rankings. If creating an actual site is too intimidating, editors can overcome phobias about technology by having a professional do the design work and then learning how to do their own updates—a skill that can translate into new business doing site updates for clients and colleagues, as well as give the editor control over when updates get made.

WordPress is popular for creating sites because it is easy to use (for design as well). Another program, Contribute, can be used for website updates without having to learn complex coding and style sheets.

Adin had his site designed so that he could easily add and delete textual information. “I don’t need any programming knowledge to do the updates,” he said. He still uses a programmer for updating his online style sheet, however, given to the complexity of that information.

Margulis maintains his own site, although, as often happens, “there’s a bit of a shoemaker’s children aspect to it: I don’t update it as often as I should.” O’Moore-Klopf, Court, and Schutz do their own updates, as does Haley—that capability was her reason to learn to use WordPress.

What works for editors

What makes a website work depends on how it looks, what it says, and what the owner wants it to accomplish.

Effectiveness depends on “the audience—type of business—the editor is trying to attract,” said Adin. “An editor who works directly with authors needs a different website than someone who works only with established publishers. Universally, every editor’s website does need biographical, contact, and projects-worked-on information.”

Adin’s clients can self-schedule projects, view the style sheets for their projects any time, and advise of changes they want instituted,

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but he says, “I doubt that editors who work [directly] with authors would either need or want such capability.”

To O’Moore-Klopf, the essentials are “copy that gives a good sense of your skills and what you’re like to work with; the words that potential clients will search the Internet for; projects—some sort of portfolio; complete contact information; ease of navigation; a clean look; a total lack of grammar errors and spelling errors; [and] links that work.”

Schutz is committed to having a “consistent look and feel” across all parts of her site. “No matter where you look, you will see the logo, the same pix, the same friendly text,” she said. She also has found it important to let prospects know what it’s like to work with her. “Clients have commented that the praise quotes [testimonials] displayed on the site ... and found in references on LinkedIn let them know that I was someone they wanted to work with,” she said.

Displaying a variety of work samples from a variety of genres heads off losing out on jobs due to pigeonholing, Schutz added, and a prompt response to queries generated by the website is important to conveying professionalism and reliability.

Schutz also has found that site navigation must be easy. “If clients can’t get back to a page to review content ... you lose contracts,” she warned.

An editor’s website must have “clarity and sincerity,” said Margulis. “If the visitor leaves without knowing what services you offer or if your copy sounds like you are selling soap, you have a problem.”

Court would look for “a genuine voice—no pretense, no posturing.” She suggests including a project list, samples, and “a testimonial or two” because a website is “nothing more than a chance introduction at a meeting, a storefront, a cover letter. Who you are and what you offer is what matters. How you present yourself matters.”

In deciding what her site should say, Davis took her branding expert’s research-based advice. “We determined that [incorporating] my personality into my website was very important,” she said. “It helps potential clients get a better feel for who I am, to see if we would be a good fit.”

According to Haley, an editor’s site should include “contact information, along with some description of services provided, and at least a sketch of one’s background/experience. Other elements—photo, rates, testimonials, full resumé, samples—are debatable.” She included “everything but the testimonials” at first, and, “when the economy tanked,” she took down the rates page rather than discourage potential clients.

Testimonials can be essential to an editor’s website for those who work on proprietary materials that can’t be posted as samples or on projects that would embarrass clients if the editor’s work became visible to the public.

Not everyone includes a rate page. Doing so does discourage tire-kickers and clients who won’t pay one’s preferred rates, but it can also discourage clients who might pay less but be worthwhile, and it can lock you into lower fees than some clients might be willing to pay.

Haley originally planned to make her site all text but took the advice of a friend who is a designer and “spent many hours on searching for bookish, writing-y [stock] images that might be

appropriate; spent a few bucks and downloaded a bunch”; and used most of them.

Whether to include a photo is another subject of constant debate. Some editors prefer to let their work, experience, philosophy, and client lists or testimonials speak for them; they are shy of showing what they look like or think a photo is irrelevant. Others say that including a photo seems to reassure prospective clients by making the editor more human, approachable, and real.

As Margulis advises, though, “If you’re going to put your mug shot on the site, then put as much thought, effort, and grooming into the effort as you would for a job interview. If that means paying a professional photographer and a hairdresser and getting a little bit dressed up, so be it.” Use a picture of yourself, not a stock image of a model, and make it recognizable and professional—don’t use a family snapshot, a photo of a messy office, or a picture in which you look sloppy or goofy.

Making it good

It should go without saying that an editor’s website would be letter-perfect, but a surprising number of editors have typos on their sites. Operating on the understanding that it is almost impossible to proofread one’s own work, O’Moore-Klopf suggests asking a colleague to review the site to catch errors. Self-editing is a good move; O’Moore-Klopf said that much of her site is “far wordier than I recommend (for) an editor’s website” and plans to “write much more tightly” in her next revision. She also recommends checking links often to make sure that they still work.

Does it bring home the bacon?

The bottom line is whether a website generates business. For these editors, the answer is generally “yes.”

Margulis reports that “almost all of my business comes through my website.” Adin agrees: “Absolutely.”

Haley has not gotten new business from her site directly yet, but knows that “people check it out when they’re checking me out from other contact angles.” She has found that her site serves as a combination of a business card, brochure, resumé, and casual interview.

Court’s website “definitely” brings her new business, she said, although “it has been stop number 2, and stop number 1 was not a search engine”—that first stop is one of the directories in which she is listed.

Davis has found that “new clients have contacted me through my website and from Internet searches, so it is definitely a positive. New clients have come to me saying that they visited my website and liked it, so it seems to at least make me more visible.”

Schutz’s website has brought her work, although she does not rely only on her site for new business: “It is just one of the marketing pieces that contributes to my client load.”

O’Moore-Klopf’s site has definitely brought her work, once it was up long enough to get noticed and revamped to look more professional, she said.

The experiences and insights of these colleagues should be enough to encourage every *Copyediting* reader to at least consider getting a website. ■

Freelance writer/editor Ruth E. Thaler-Carter created her original website herself in PageMill, had it redesigned by a colleague in Dreamweaver, and does her own updates using Contribute—but is learning WordPress.