There is nothing more uncomfortable for mechanically minded facilities professionals than facing the construction challenges of the digital world. It’s a world that most of them wouldn’t dare venture into—even wearing a hard hat! Websites are a blessing, but can also be a curse. Their flashy images, colorful GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format), and blocks of informative text are imperative if you want to lure users to your site, but the terrain in the digital environment is always changing. How do facilities professionals rise up to meet the challenge of being technologically savvy in an ever-changing landscape of web design? RMA was willing to meet this challenge head-on.

MOVING TO A 21ST CENTURY WEBSITE
When Rocky Mountain APPA (RMA) sought to undergo a complete redesign of their website, many factors had to be considered:
1. What digital tools were facilities professionals using in their daily lives?
2. What kind of information were the region’s membership looking for with regard to RMA?
3. How could RMA’s website interact with its members in a valuable way?
4. How could RMA’s website be designed for longevity and ease-of-use on the backend?

In 2016, the RMA Board felt it was time to embark on a complete overhaul of its website, which had been in use for several years. There is no concrete answer as to how often a website should be redesigned, but overwhelmingly experts agree that a site should receive a facelift when it no longer meets the needs, objectives, or expectations of the organization or its users. This was certainly true of the RMA site; it had minimal graphics, hard-to-read events lists, and no accessible way to display news.

Dave Turnquist, RMA Past President, describes the Board’s rationale in early 2016 regarding a website update:

“I do remember thinking and expressing that the old website may be adequate, but far from new and uplifting. We wanted to encourage RMA members to use the website, and to make it easier to find information and maintain now and in the future. We wanted to move from a 20th century site to a 21st century site.”
KEEPING INFORMED AND CONNECTED

We have all seen the boom of handheld devices hitting our campuses, and the RMA site wasn’t designed in a “mobile-friendly” way. Small text and links made it impossible to easily navigate this “antique” site on a cellphone or tablet. According to a 2013 report titled *Internet Trends* (Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield, and Byers), people check their mobile phone up to 150 times a day—another reason why RMA needed a new site to accommodate the membership using this digital platform for email, news, and website perusal.

It was important to RMA for the membership to be able to access information quickly, easy, and effortlessly. The APPA regional websites have traditionally been used to share information or engage the region’s membership, to keep them informed of professional development opportunities and networking, and just to help them stay connected.

“One of the challenges within RMA is keeping the membership connected to one another. We are a huge region spread across many western states, up into Canada, and now into Mexico. Our site needed to be a place where our members could feel connected through easy access to information,” says Lisa Potter, current RMA President and associate director of facilities operations at University of Colorado Boulder.

PITCHING A DIFFERENT IDEA

Construction of the new website began in January 2016. Rachel Stone, RMA Communications Coordinator, and Nathan Acosta from the University of New Mexico, began analyzing the content, conceptualized the look of the new site, and brainstormed navigation ideas. The team began to build the site fully in HTML (HyperText Markup Language), or in layman’s term “code,” while utilizing Bootstrap so it would be mobile-responsive.

Months into the project, it became clear that building a website using HTML only would be a maintenance issue over time—only the best IT people know the inner workings of HTML; facilities professionals usually don’t. Six months into the project with the site 75 percent built, Stone went to the RMA Board to pitch a different idea.

It was hard to say to the Board, “We’ve been working for six months on our new site, which we all love, but we think it would be best for the organization to scratch the work we’ve done, and essentially start over.” Our idea was to use WordPress, mainly because of the easy maintenance of the site and the user-friendly nature of that platform.

Nobody understands the importance of strategizing the long-term maintenance of a project more than the facilities professional. The RMA Board agreed with us, despite the setback. Because WordPress is a more intuitive website-design platform, most people with a basic understanding of how to use a computer and software like Microsoft Word or PowerPoint can learn how to create websites with it. Acosta found the template that would work best for the site’s overall design and functionality, and built the framework for the site. Stone was then able to easily add content, including images to the pages within the template. From beginning to end, the new site was built in three short months.

GIVING BACK

The new RMA site is graphically beautiful, mobile-responsive, and features a news section that organizes articles, ultimately archiving them in a way that is user-friendly. There is also a calendar that gives the user an at-a-glance view of upcoming events—click on the event, and more information pops up with links to registration, fliers, and even a map.

RMA has always been dedicated to giving back to and supporting its membership—and this site also demonstrates how RMA “lifts as we climb.”

To see the RMA site, visit rma.appa.org. ⚪

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