

Creating an online community

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Internet Genealogy is your guide to successful genealogical research using the ever-increasing power of the World Wide Web. We also recognize, however, that the Internet isn't necessarily the be all and end all of your research, so Internet Genealogy will also tell you what to do if you cannot find the records you need and how to confirm your findings. The magazine also covers advanced genealogical methods such as DNA analysis, as well as software and technology reviews, case studies, databases and other Internet-related family history topics.

Today's genealogists have many resources available to them. One that is commonly under utilized is the family website. A website is essential today because it allows you to create a place to share your research, ask others for help, and to organize your research. Websites come in many styles from small and simple to large online communities. My first family website, like many, was a simple HTML site consisting of just a few pages. Over the next three years the site grew into a five thousand page administrative nightmare.

Most of these pages were auto-generated by photo album and family tree programs. The nightmare began when I added content to the site. Simply adding one page required editing links on three other pages. Making design or layout changes required editing every page in the site. The use of PHP and Java Script can help reduce this work load but did not solve my issue.

Use Google to find hundreds of premade scripts that you can cut and past into your website.

By creating an online community and not just a website you solve many of these issues. A website is something that you setup and forget about, but an online community becomes part of your genealogy quest. Ask yourself, how many briefcases you need to carry around with you in order to have all your research information handy? With an online community the answer is zero.

Imagine having generations worth of information at the touch of a button instead of locked away in briefcases and boxes. Your next genealogy trip could be empty handed because your website becomes the briefcase. Scan or transcribe all your documents and the next time you need the birthday of that 16th century cousin it is at your finger tips. Do you spend more time at the photo copier than you do researching? Now, you can take digital photos or transcribe the item and upload it directly to your site without leaving the library. Finding that scrap piece of paper in your genealogy bag may be exasperating, but when you make your website work for you it is always at your finger tips.

On a recent trip to the Clayton Library in Houston, Texas I found several items to enhance my research. I was able to collect all the information and then type it directly into my website in just a few minutes. I then contacted a relative in another city who was instantly able to collaborate on the findings.

Now you know how valuable your website can be, let us look at one way to create your own online community. After all there is no point in obsessing over your research if you do not share it with the world.

DEVELOP A PLAN

Before diving into a new website you should develop an organizational plan. This plan will help you decide what your site will look like, and what information you want to share.

For my family site <http://www.bracewellfamily.com/> the plan was organized in this form:

- •- Budget - Less than \$10/month in web hosting fees.

- •- Share hundreds of genealogy document, stories, and articles.

- •- Share audio and video clips of family reunions.

- •- Keep some documents private for family and others public.

- •- Every website member to post their own content.

- •- Photo album with shopping cart so family members could order copies.

- •- Family tree program - Edit & update online, graphical layout.

- •- Everything accessible with one password per user.

- •- Users can create their own web page.

- •- Forum for visitors to post questions.

- •- What's new section with newly added content.

- •- Search - cross reference all indexes and articles.

- •- Change layout easy.

- •- Selected users can help admin the site.

I sent this information to several website creators asking them to build a site with this plan in mind. Some of the companies laughed at me, and other wanted thirty to forty thousand dollars. Now I don't know about you, but if I had that kind of money lying around I sure would not be using it on a website. I knew there had to be a more cost effective solution, so I spent the next few months testing alternatives.

OPEN SOURCE TO THE RESCUE

Having been in the technology field I knew of the growing open source community. These are mostly volunteers that produce top quality programs, and best of all they are 100% FREE. Sourceforge.net is the largest of these communities with over 100,000 projects and 1,000,000 registered users. When you search their files you can find over 60 genealogy based programs, but you will not find one specifically designed for creating full websites. For this, we look at programs called content management systems. CMS programs work by organizing your data and dynamically creating web pages without you having to know any programming. With this program you can change the layout, move content from one page to another, and add new content with just a few mouse clicks.

JOOMLA!!!!!! (INSERT PHOTO - JOOMLA.jpg)

No, this is not an acronym for give me money. Joomla is phonetic spelling for the Swahili word "Jumla", which means "all together" or "as a whole". The creators chose this name because it signified their dedication to the project. Joomla is based off the Mambo <http://www.mamboserver.com/> platform and retains almost all the original Mambo developers.

After trying several CMS programs I found Joomla <http://www.joomla.org/> to be the best suited for a family website. They have the most knowledgeable support staff and have created extensive documentation to help inexperienced users. This was a great help to me because I had no idea how to setup or use these programs when I started.

Joomla works by organizing your content, and allowing for expansion with small programs called extensions. Extensions add specific functions to your website such as guest book, photo album, web links, family tree, and more. Currently there are over six hundred extensions available with others being developed all the time. Joomla also uses templates to change the appearance of your site. If we were building a house Joomla would be the frame, templates would be the exterior, and extensions would be the furnishings.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT STEP

Now that you have an idea how you want your site to look, we need to put everything together. Joomla requires a web host with PHP, MYSQL, and Apache. If you don't know what these are do not worry, I did not either. Web hosting companies are everywhere these days. Expect to pay \$3-\$10/month for a virtual server. Virtual servers are more cost effective because you share the hosting cost with other users. Before choosing a company read their member forum, and check their uptime ratings. If the company is not reliable, their members will let you know. (INSERT - List of hosting companies)

Installing Joomla is simple, just download the program and follow the instructions. It comes with a self installer program that walks you through all of the steps. You will need to provide the installer with some basic information about your hosting provider, passwords, and database name. Once the install is complete, you will have a working website.

(HIGHLIGHT) Complete installation instructions available at www.bracewellfamily.com/cms

CUSTOMIZING WITH EXTENSIONS

Spending a little time going through the list of extensions will help you customize your site to meet your needs. Over six hundred extensions are available for free and many others only require a small fee. The following extensions will help make your genealogy site user friendly: <http://extensions.joomla.org/>

Community Builder is a user management system. It allows you to add custom fields during the user registration and set the access level for each user. I use this to ask my new members questions about their family. <http://www.joomlapolis.com/>

JCE WYSIWYG Editor is an enhanced editing program and file manager that works like your favorite word processing program. WYSIWYG stands for "what you see is what you get". This program does everything from centering text, to adding tables. It will be your main source for adding content to your site. JCE's file manager can be used with a photo album program allowing you to place photos in your content. www.cellardoor.za.net/jce/

Joomlaboard is a community forum. This allows users or guest to post questions and comments to your site. Every genealogist knows the importance of a good message board. <http://www.tsmf.net/>

User Home Pages allows your site members to create their own personal home page. UHP uses the JCE editor so your members can create their home page without knowing any programming skills. Type in their information, add some photos, and press ok. <http://www.ravenswoodit.co.uk/>

Donation module allows your guest and members to help support the website. The module uses the Paypal service to accept checks, credit cards, and Paypal contributions. Several versions of this extension are available. <http://www.sstreamtv.com/>, <http://www.sstreamtv.com/>, <http://www.joomla.elseif.info/>

Templates allow you to change the look of your site with just a mouse click. You can add a winter feel with a snow theme or a summer theme with flowers. Template files are easy to customize to get the look and feel that is just right for your website. I use three templates on my site to give each section a separate theme.

Googling "Joomla + Template" will help you find thousands of premade templates.

GENEALOGY CMS STYLE

You cannot have a genealogy website without a family tree. When you search the internet you will find many programs to display family trees. I have tried most of them and was disappointed with the standard text layouts. Who can actually understand these things anyway?

..... 2 Robert Bracewell 1553 - 1613

..... +Jane (Jone) Robert 1555 - 1591

..... 3 Richard Bracewell 1576 - 1640

..... +Jane

PhpGedView is a family tree program that solves this problem by displaying your family tree in a graphical layout. It allows you to view, edit, and share your family tree online. The privacy settings keep all of your living relative's information safe while allowing family member access. Import your GEDCOM and multimedia files directly into PGV. The latest version supports multiple GEDCOM files and the ability to link people across different files and websites. Set the program to moderate all online updates allows you to approve the additions before they are published. PGV is a stand-alone program that is under constant development by founder John Finlay and Neumont University students. Best of all it is part of the open source community. <http://www.bracewellfamily.com/www.phpgedview.sourceforge.net> (INSERT PHOTO - PHPGEDVIEW.jpg)

PhpGedView Component is required because PGV was not designed to work directly with Joomla. This small program creates a bridge between Joomla and PGV, allowing both sites to share the same user registration. <http://forge.joomla.org/sf/projects/phpgedview>

Adding PGV to your site is easy. Download the PGV program and install it according to the included instructions. PGV must be within your Joomla root directory for the component file to work. Now download and install the PGV component file in Joomla. Configure the settings and upload your GEDCOM files.

The addition of a photo album is also a must have these days. Many options are available for Joomla users. A comparison of photo albums is available at <http://www.gallery-addons.com/content/view/64/124>, but I found that Gallery works best for my site.

Gallery is a photo and multimedia sharing application. You can organize your items in albums, edit them online, and even let members purchase items with a shopping cart add-on. Gallery can resize photos, password protect albums, play media files, print photos, create slideshows, and more. Gallery is also part of the open source community and is under constant development by its incredible staff. <http://gallery.menalto.com/> (INSERT PHOTO - GALLERY.jpg)

Gallery Bridge file is required because gallery is a stand-alone program like PGV. The bridge file shares your Joomla user registration to automatically log in users to Gallery. http://developer.joomla.org/sf/projects/gallery2_bridge

Gallery Image Chooser allows you to use your Gallery photos with JCE WYSIWYG editor that we installed earlier.

Installing Gallery is the same as PGV. Download the Gallery program and install it in your Joomla root directory by following the instructions. Configure your settings and then install the Gallery Bridge files in Joomla by following the enclosed instructions. Install the Gallery Image Chooser, or set the JCE file manager configuration to the Gallery data directory to use photos in your content.

THE FAMILY LEGACY CONTINUES

A beginning website creator can expect to spend about one day downloading and installing the necessary software. An additional day or two may be spent customizing and adding your content. When you have the site ready, contact all your family members to let them know. Promoting your site on message boards and other genealogy sites related to your surname will increase visitors from other families, and submitting your site to search engines like Yahoo and Google will ensure new researchers can find your site. Before long your website will be drawing in new family members from around the world.