

# IT Committee Looks to Boost Council Presence on the Web

By PETER ATKINSON, Deputy Editor

The Navy League's Information Technology (IT) for Council Initiatives Committee is promoting an ambitious initiative aimed at having *all* councils use the Internet and electronic methods to communicate with their market and membership.

While the number of Navy League councils that have their own websites continues to grow, the relative percentage of them among the organization as a whole is still somewhat low. James M. Semerad, IT Committee chairman and Michigan Area president, estimated that roughly 70 councils are currently on the web, up from about 30 two-and-a-half years ago.

But that's still only about 25 percent of the 275 active Navy League councils worldwide. To help those numbers grow, the IT Committee hosted a presentation, "How to Set Up a Council Website," at the Navy League National Convention last summer.

The committee also is working to develop a pilot Navy League

Council Website Network that will demonstrate the value and cost-effectiveness of a coordinated web development strategy, and promote the project to all councils, encouraging them to join the network.

In the past, websites could be expensive to maintain and required substantial technical expertise to establish and operate. But things have changed, Semerad said.

"You don't have to learn Dreamweaver or HTML or any of the other web programs," he said. "You don't have to dedicate a lot of time to site maintenance. If you know how to type and use e-mail, you can have a great looking web site."

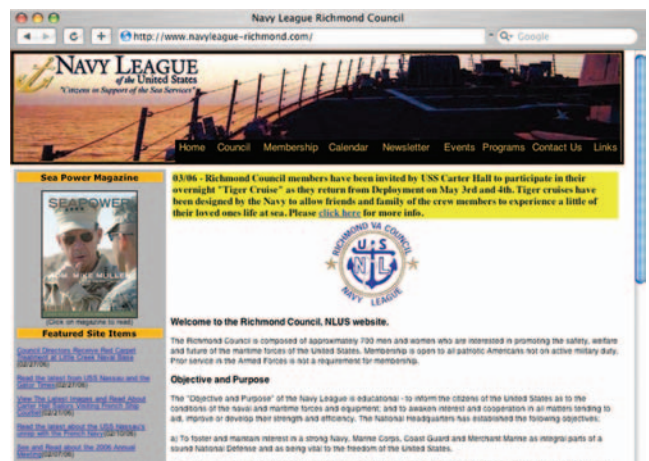
The IT Committee has selected four preferred website service providers — Telebyte NW Internet Services in Washington, WebSlingers Web Development in Michigan, Best Managers in South Carolina and Training Technology Corp. in Georgia — to provide easier access and greater flexibility for councils, areas and regions to pur-

chase web services and/or perform the website development.

The annual fee typically charged by the providers is approximately the cost of printing and mailing one issue of a council newsletter — and the site can be up and running in less than a day, Semerad said. On top of that, updates and site maintenance can be as easy as sending an e-mail, with the provider handling the data input and formatting. Councils also have the option of having their own webmasters take care of content matters.

The Pensacola, Fla., Council contracted in 2005 with Training Technology to get its website back up and running after the council's webmaster, an airman at the nearby Naval Air Station, was transferred.

"That was my focus when I took over as president [for a one-year term in 2005], to return us to the 21st century," said Thomas Pruter, a national director with the council. "So far it's worked out very



These screen shots from Navy League Council websites here and on the following page illustrate the array of web page templates available through the website service providers the Information Technology for Council Initiatives Committee has selected as part of its coordinated web development strategy for councils, areas and regions.



well. The site looks good, they take our updates and plug them right in, we post our newsletter on there and, most of all, it works. Nothing turns a novice or a new visitor off more than a dead link or something that loads really slowly.”

Utilizing one of the preferred service providers is not mandatory. At present about one-third of the councils with active websites are being serviced through one of them.

However, Semerad noted, “these people know what the Navy League is all about,” and have customized their services accordingly.

Each of the providers offers their own web page template to councils that features a uniform look, design and format for content. Basic web page features include areas for council news and activities, newsletter archives, adopted ship and unit information, council affiliate information and council contacts. There typically also are links to each of the sea service websites, Navy League national headquarters and *Seapower* magazine. The providers also allow for options such as photo galleries and e-mail services.

“What we really like is the ability to blast e-mails to everyone in our database [which now has about 200 addresses] whenever there is council news to send out or we get something from national headquarters,” Pruter said. “That

has been a very handy feature.”

The advantages derived from a website are especially important given the rising costs of postage and the fact that e-mail has become such a prevalent means of communication.

“If you really want to be connected with the sea services or your government officials, you have to get online,” Semerad said, “especially if you want to communicate with your adopted ships, units or Sea Cadets.”

Along with its communication functions, a web presence can serve as a community education and public relations tool for councils, as well means for building membership.

“I’m contacted as much by non-members as members,” Semerad said. “When they ask ‘what is the Navy League?’ or ‘what do you do?’ I tell them to go to our website and take a look.”

Putting the council web address on stationary or business cards is a simple way to direct people to the site, and including membership application forms on the site makes the sign-up process even easier for would-be members.

For some of the smaller Navy League councils, membership may indeed not be large enough to support service — even through one of the preferred providers. But if that is the case, such a council can utilize the web to publicize events and

make people aware of the Navy League’s presence.

In an August 2004 “Council Alert” from Navy League headquarters, Don Ulias, president of the Beaufort, S.C., Council and Bob O’Neill, then-area president for the South Carolina area, suggested utilizing the websites communities or municipal organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce host to promote themselves and help spread the word about the Navy League.

Many of these sites offer public areas to post messages, letters, meeting notices and special events listings. The Beaufort Council does not maintain its own website. So Ulias posted a letter to the community site to publicize the council and mention that it was looking for members and volunteers to support the council’s activities.

The Beaufort community website has the capability of sending mass e-mails, so Ulias’ letter was sent throughout the community. He also announced upcoming tours of the Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort and the Parris Island Recruit Training Base. The result: nine replies, two new volunteers, one new member and six prospects. ■

*For information on council websites, the Navy League’s preferred service providers and other information technology matters, see the IT Steering Committee’s website at: <http://navyleague-itc.nlus.us/index.shtml>*