Inn Communication in a Digital Age: Creating and Maintaining an Inn website

This resource will describe why having an Inn website is a vital membership communication tool, how to plan for creating your Inn's website, and how to use the website effectively.

Every Inn has the option to have a free, local Inn website hosted by the national office using the Umbraco web editor tool. Inns also have the choice to use other web hosting services at their own expense.

Advantages of utilizing the free website provided by the national office include:

- The free website provided by the national office has logos and other design elements that are uniform across all Inns.

- Web page templates and media are pre-designed and ready to use with your Inn's customized content.

- Updates to the Inn Management System (IMS) are automatically updated via the Umbraco site.

To learn more about the Inn Management System and communication tools available to you, contact your Director of Chapter Relations.

Why create an Inn website

A website is an important tool to facilitate communication with Inn members and to connect with the community. It can serve many different functions, such as providing information about the Inn and its history, highlighting the benefits of Inn membership, outlining the process to join the Inn, serving as a repository for monthly program materials, and more.

In an age marked by digital communications, it is integral that the Inn have a way to engage its members between Inn meetings and let the community know of its existence and the resources it can provide.

Creating a communication plan

Before jumping into building a website, time should first be spent identifying the audience and creating key messaging. If you take the time now to set specific communication goals and a plan to accomplish those, even when your leadership rotates you should still see measurable outcomes from the process of having a Communications Plan in place.

This process may seem a little overwhelming, so you'll need to approach it as a step-by-step plan. Some components of an Inn Communications Plan are:
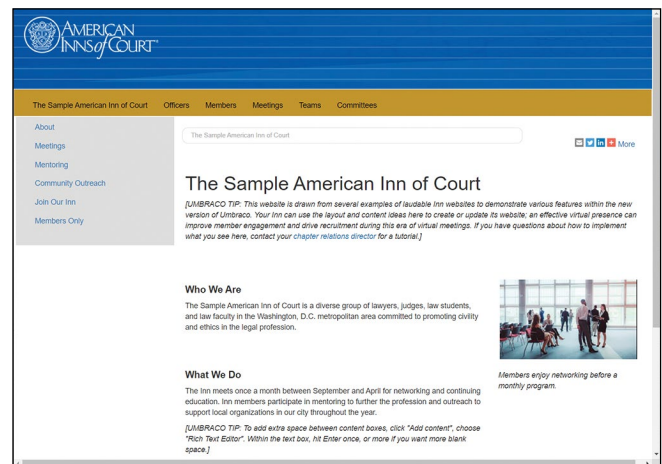
Goal(s):

- What are you trying to achieve? Inn wide or issue-specific?

- What are the objectives or goals for the communication(s)? (Make them SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound.)

- Who are you communicating with or trying to influence (members, potential members, general public, etc.)?

- What is the key point(s) you want to convey? (Make sure they are simple, authentic and persuasive.)

How (Strategies/Tactics): actionable plans and specific communications

- Will you need to use additional communication tools other than the website?

Timelines:

- Will you need to post content on a monthly or quarterly basis? More regularly?

Measurement & Evaluation:

- What can you track or measure to determine if your goal was met?

Developing a plan and documenting the process and outcomes will serve the Inn this year and for years in the future.

Planning the site layout

A site map—or content tree—is the framework of your website on which content is built. It lays out the structure of your website. Items marked "(IMS)" are automatically populated if the Inn is enrolled in the IMS. Here are suggested topics to address on the Inn's site:

- Local Inn history
- Biography and photo of Inn namesake
- Link to www.innsofcourt.org website (if using external Web site host)
- Inn bylaws and policies
- Current calendar of meetings (IMS)
- Current Executive Committee listing with contact information (IMS)
- Membership information (IMS) *Requires members to be signed in.
- Membership application information (PDF or online form is suggested)
- American Inns of Court Diversity Policy and the Inn's efforts to promote it
- Mentoring opportunities and guidelines
- Community outreach opportunities and post-event articles and photos
- Opportunities to engage with national programs and events

Maintaining the Inn's website

It is recommended that the Inn designate a Web Administrator as part of its Executive Committee. This person will be responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the website and regular content updates. While more than one person can have administrative rights for the website, this can cause confusion. Instead, have one Web Administrator and a back-up contact to step in as needed to streamline website maintenance.

Remember, the Inn's website is only useful if its content is relevant. It is imperative the website be updated regularly and checked for accuracy.

Need more inspiration?

Sample American Inns of Court website:
https://inns.innsofcourt.org/for-members/inns/the-sample-american-inn-of-court/

Judge John M. Scheb AIC (FL): www.innsofcourt.org/inns/schebinn

Willamette AIC (OR): www.innsofcourt.org/inns/wvinn

Justice Marie L. Garibaldi AIC for ADR (NJ): www.innsofcourt.org/inns/garibaldiadrinn

Barbara Jordan AIC (TX): www.innsofcourt.org/inns/jordaninn

Richard S. Rodney AIC (DE): www.innsofcourt.org/inns/the-richard-s-rodney-inn-of-court/

There are a few Inns that have chosen to pay for their own website services:

Thomas E. Penick, Jr. AIC (FL): www.penickinn.org

Richard Linn AIC (IL): www.linninn.org

Anthony M. Kennedy AIC (CA): www.kennedyinn.org

Hon. William C. Conner AIC. (NY): www.connerinn.org

Harry Phillips AIC (TN): http://harryphillipsaic.com