
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

NewPA.com

2009 NASCIO Recognition Awards
Digital Government: Government to Business

June 3, 2009

Summary

In 2003, the Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED) contracted with BarkleyREI (then Ripple Effects Interactive) to create a resourceful website that serves a variety of visitors. NewPA.com is our department's main website but it is also a powerful marketing tool which has proven successful in attracting businesses and site selectors to Pennsylvania.

When we launched the original newPA.com, the site was considered cutting edge. Over time we developed a clearer understanding of what our visitors wanted and what was inhibiting them from accessing the information they needed. We learned, for example, that site selectors are especially critical of economic development websites that are dated and cluttered.

Despite the original success of newPA.com, we knew it was time for a change. As one of the most important tools we use to communicate, it is imperative that the Department of Community and Economic Development provide the most up-to-date information, while still keeping newPA.com meaningful and concise. Our website is a reflection of our department and if we created one that was cleaner and simpler, then our customers ultimately would view us as organized and professional.

In October 2008, we fully redesigned newPA.com to improve branding, navigation, and ease of use. Currently, the site serves many different audiences—from individuals seeking to start businesses or improve their neighborhoods, to local government officials and companies of all shapes and sizes. To serve each audience well, we had to redesign the navigation to provide our users with the desired information quickly and easily.

In addition to the reorganization of content on the site, we wanted to change the look and feel of the homepage by introducing new success stories to influence perception about DCED-funded projects. To accomplish this, we planned an editorial calendar and collected photography to highlight these stories in a unique way. The homepage uses flash to rotate the images—which include catchy taglines—leading the visitor into the success story on the level page.

Improved mapping, customized contact forms, intelligent search capability, and easier access to funding information are several other new features incorporated into the site.

The redesign has already shown us great results. In April 2009, newPA.com was selected as an Official Honoree of the 13th Annual Webby Awards in the Government category. The Official Honoree distinction is awarded to the top 15 percent of work received from all 50 states and more than 60 countries. Furthermore, we have received exceptionally positive feedback from returning visitors to the site as well as from those navigating for the first time.

Please view the DCED website at <http://www.newpa.com>.

Business Problem & Solution

In 2003, Ripple Effects Interactive helped the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) launch newPA.com, a website that not only provided information on the services of our department, but which also spoke to businesses, site selectors, international investors, and other visitors with a variety of interests. As the web matured, our site became dated and overwhelmed with content. Visitors to the website found the navigation on newPA.com to be frustrating at times, and such feedback increased from both department staff and outside users. Together with our interactive firm, we researched the costs, manpower, and time needed to successfully redesign our website.

The department's marketing office organized workshops for the various program offices impacted by the redesign and for those people who could contribute to refreshing the content and providing feedback on the reorganization of information throughout the site. During these brainstorming sessions, we created a content outline—similar to a site map—and found many areas that could be consolidated or removed completely. Several program managers also introduced new topics that were not considered during the creation of the original site.

While the design and navigation elements of the new site showed great improvement, we continued to face issues with data and functionality. For example, we developed a new tool to assist visitors with their search for funding and incentives. The "Funding and Program Finder" on the old newPA.com was basically a long list of our community and economic development funding programs. With a new tool, users could filter their search based on key search criteria (purpose or type of funding and size of business), or simply use the search engine within that tool.

This was just another technique to allow the user to customize his experience on the website. Unfortunately, we encountered technical issues when the Funding and Program Finder failed to match the appropriate programs from the database with the categories offered on newPA.com. This problem inconveniently occurred in the midst of reviewing the beta site with our customer service team. Immediately, the marketing office and group of program managers reconvened to come up with a solution to the categorization issue. We realized that the "size of business" category was the source of the problem of faulty search results; we removed it as an option, as it did not apply to many of DCED's programs.

Finally, we rewrote the content, approved homepage stories/images, and signed off on the design and navigation. The site was coming together and it was time to show it off!

After much testing and some minor tweaks to the content, the marketing office invited the Secretary of Community and Economic Development, the executive deputy secretary, all deputy secretaries, and other executives for a sneak preview. Everyone was more than pleased with the outcome. We were ready to launch.

During kick-off week, a department-wide email announced the launch of the new site and invited staff to participate in a question-and-answer session. The internal feedback was exceptionally positive and staff quickly became comfortable with the new navigation. In addition to educating our own staff, we ran an online marketing campaign, incorporating rich media ads which demonstrated some of the new homepage features, including our success stories.

Outreach was an important aspect of the redesign and proved to be a successful strategy in the return on investment.

newPA.com

Metric	Jan 09	Feb 09	Mar 09
Total Visits	52,549	55,108	62,526
Total Pageviews	202,563	206,840	236,473
Average Visits Per Day	1,695	1,968	2,016
Average Pageviews Per Day	6,534	7,387	7,628
Average Pages Per Visit	3.85	3.75	3.78
Average Time on Site	0:03:58	0:03:54	0:03:49

Benefits

- Our customer service center had been inundated with email inquiries from our old website. During the redesign, we worked with their team to create customized that can be filtered based on the request. Inquiries are more clear and customer service can more easily direct the question to the most appropriate program office.
- Traffic is consistently growing with pageviews up 52% and unique visitors up 19% since January 2009.
- The Funding & Program Finder continues to be the most visited area of the site, with the Renewable Energy Program: Geothermal and Wind Projects and the Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program being the most viewed.
- The homepage success stories for March had users engaged for 1:44, the highest so far this year.

- The last round of e-blasts touting PA's national site selection ranking had an average open rate of 13%.
- Virtual Trade Advisor Page: January 2009 was the 4th highest month for reports that were generated after June, September and October of 2008

Significance

The Department of Community & Economic Development serves local government officials, small and growing businesses, main street communities, individuals looking for tax information, foreign direct investors, and people searching for housing assistance, and many others with diverse interests. The newPA.com redesign has reached a broad audience and the return on investment has been remarkable.

Not only has our site traffic increased with page views up 52% but our homepage success stories have been widely read. Users are spending more time on the site than ever before. They are enjoying a more personalized experience while they are interacting with our engaging new features.

The newPA.com redesign was a collaborative effort among many individuals in our department, including the lead executive staff, the executive director of the marketing office, interactive manager, director of customer service, and our CIO.

Our interactive agency, BarkleyREI, played an essential role developing the new site and responding to our requests.

Benefit of this Project

During our research prior to the redesign, we conducted a comparative analysis to study the online presence of some of our competitor state economic development organizations. We discovered that the majority of the websites were dated (like ours) or cluttered and disorganized.

These findings led us to reinvent our website as one of the only clean and simple (yet stylish) state economic development sites. Our site now stands out as a unique model for others to aspire to, and we continue to push forward with ideas that will keep us on the cutting edge. The second phase of our redesign explores the social media realm, including LinkedIn, Twitter and other networking tools. We are now exploring ways to utilize these tools effectively and to assimilate their content into our own.