

NEW AFFINITY PARTNER TAKES THE PAIN OUT OF HAVING A WEBSITE FOR YOUR TOWN OR WATER SYSTEM

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A good website can save you significant time and money — and now RuralWaterImpact.com and MunicipallImpact.com make it easier than ever.

"Do we REALLY need a website?" NYRWA asks that you please share this article with your clerk and other Administrative staff.

When you hear that question, you might shake your head and think to yourself, "We don't need a website." "Most of our customers wouldn't know how to use it." "Websites are too expensive and too difficult to set up." "I wouldn't know where to start."

Well, if that IS what you're thinking, you might want to think again.

Internet use is growing – FAST! Today, over 80% of US households have Internet service, and broadband is continually expanding to rural areas. At least 85% of all Internet users shop, bank, and/or pay their bills online, and customers, even in the most rural areas, have come to expect these conveniences. This doesn't even take into account the widespread adoption of smart phones that are Internet connected.

On top of that, the age demographic that is growing the fastest in computer literacy is between the ages of 50 and 75. Of course, younger generations tend to be technically proficient, but now their grandparents are getting on board as well. Even my 89-year-old neighbor now likes to check her Facebook page on her iPad.

So, you might be wondering: "Could I just set up a Facebook or Twitter page for my business rather than a website?" Well, it's true that Facebook or Twitter can be excellent tools to get news and messages out to your residents. However, not everyone is on Facebook or Twitter, and even if they are there's no guarantee they'll see the information that you post there. So you still need a place where your customers can easily access forms and reports, rates and policies, FAQs, bill payment options and other important information.

Consider that your website can be a powerful communication tool, and an extremely effective one at that. Think of your site as a "giant public bulletin board" where your customers can find answers to a plethora of pertinent questions about your town or

water system (Where are you located? What are your office hours? What are your rates and policies? How do I pay my water bill or parking ticket? How do I contact you? Where can I see the most recent Water Quality Report? What is the latest news or events coming up? What's on this month's board/council agenda? How do I establish new service? What are your drought contingency plans? How do I read my meter?)

Having a professional-looking website that provides up-to-date information instantly boosts your credibility with your customers, informs them of the services you provide, and increases your customers' confidence in you. And if set up correctly, your site information can be updated as frequently as you need, and it gives customers a reliable means of communicating with you as well.

To summarize the benefits of having a website, we refer to this list that what we call "The 5 C's":

- **Convenience:** Through your website, customers have access to pertinent information, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. It can save them time by giving them round-the-clock access bill payment information, download forms and reports, or to send an email to customer support. In turn, this saves you time from picking up the phone to answer questions – this means a decrease in frustration and an increase in productivity.

- **Customer Service:** Customers have greater access to everything they need to know, right at their fingertips... leaving them well informed, satisfied, and more appreciative. Better informed and satisfied customers means FEWER COMPLAINTS!

- **Communication:** News and alerts, sent by text and email, inform customers of necessary information, such as a Boil Water notice or road closure due to repair work. The "Contact Us" information can include after-hours and emergency numbers, and a simple email form. In addition to being able reach out to your customers, they also need to know they can reach you.

- **Cost Savings:** In addition to fewer phone calls, you'll also have fewer mailings! As you know New York approves ►►►

“Electronic Delivery” to distribute your Annual Water Quality Report. This means you can post your AWQR online instead of mailing it out to every single customer. We all know postage has gotten expensive, and so is paper and printing – not to mention the man-hours spent licking stamps and stuffing envelopes. The savings from one mailing alone can often cover the cost of your website.

- **Compliance:** The website allows you to post your AWQR online, with a link to provide to your customers – ensuring that you are in compliance with EPA guidelines. You can also post board agendas, Boil Water alerts, cut-off dates and other important notices for customers.

So, now you’re convinced of the benefits of having a website to both you and your customers, but you’re still not sure where to start or how much it will cost?

3 WAYS TO GET A WEBSITE

Let’s look at 3 ways you can go about getting a website:

OPTION 1. DO IT YOURSELF

The first option is you can build it yourself. There are many low-cost “website building tools” available through different companies like Godaddy.com, Homestead.com, and Wordpress.com. Although the initial cost for these solutions can appear very low, there are some drawbacks.

First, each comes with a learning curve. Every tool is different and they vary in complexity and ease-of-use. Also, the site you end up with may not have the all features you need. Alert system? Document archive? Ability to easily post your AWQR and provide a direct link to it?

Also, most have subsequent costs. Even with a “free” tool, you end up paying somewhere along the line. Whether it’s hosting, or using your own domain name, or adding multiple pages, or removing ads, etc. So what sounds like a good deal at first doesn’t always come as cheaply as it sounds at first.

OPTION 2. HIRE A WEB DESIGNER

The second option is to hire a web designer or development company to build it for you. This is usually the most expensive option. Keep in mind that web designers vary widely in their cost, skills, and reliability. An average cost for hiring a web designer is around \$3,000 for a very basic website. But it can run much higher. We were shocked to learn of one water system that paid over \$10,000 for their website – and it still didn’t work! So do not hire someone without checking with their references first.

Hosting is an additional cost. Typical can run around \$15 to \$250 per month, depending on whether you choose a shared or dedicated server, and how much bandwidth you need. Plus future updates, maintenance and support are all extra costs. These can vary greatly, too, from hourly rates of \$75-\$150/hour to monthly rates around \$150-\$250/month.

And just because you’ve hired a professional, don’t assume your work is done: Be prepared to outline all the pages and content, and to specify exactly what features you need built into it. You may also have to manage the project and keep them on task.

So, traditionally the only two ways to get a website have been to either build it yourself, or hire a web developer at a potentially high cost.

Thankfully, now there’s a third option... *Just subscribe!*

OPTION 3. SUBSCRIBE TO A WEBSITE SERVICE FOR YOUR INDUSTRY

Doctors, lawyers, restaurants... These are a few industries where services exist offering subscription-based website solutions – because they share a need for a website with common features. The benefit is that everything is already figured out, and development cost is minimal because it’s shared among a large pool of subscribers.

So this efficient solution is now available for water systems, too. **RuralWaterImpact.com** is unique in providing the only hosted website solution *specifically designed for small water systems*. Meanwhile, **MunicipalImpact.com** provides a similar website service for small cities and towns. All you do is sign up and everything is done for you.

So with these new services, the headaches and hassles of designing and developing your website has been eliminated! You receive complete website setup and all the features you need right “out of the box”. Plus secure hosting and unlimited customer support are included, too – all for a one-time setup fee and a modest monthly payment. Or save a bit more money when you choose an annual payment plan.

So, that beautiful, professional-looking website is actually within your grasp (and within your budget).

There is one more important reason why subscribing to a hosted website platform makes good sense – and in fact this may be the best reason of all: The platform that powers your website is maintained for you. All features, hosting servers, software and respective updates are all handled by the website provider.

So in other words, you don’t have to pay someone to redesign your site every few years in order to make it work with the ►►►

latest web standards, or to make it mobile friendly, etc. These updates are already done for you, behind the scenes, and as a subscriber you get the benefits automatically. Think of it like always getting to drive the latest model car – each and every year, without paying anything extra. Now, you never have to settle for a clunker of a website, ever again!

SO HOW HARD IS IT TO GET YOUR WEBSITE SET UP?

If you choose to subscribe, it's easy: If you need a website for your water system, simply go to www.ruralwaterimpact.com, click the "Sign Up" button and choose a payment plan. Or, if you're a small city or town looking for a website solution, go to www.municipalimpact.com, it works the same way. Then just fill out the brief profile form, and we'll notify you as soon as your website is launched – usually within two or three days!

Once your site is launched, we'll walk you through your Client Dashboard and show you how you can post alerts and make edits to your website at any time you want. (Not a technical genius? Don't worry, if you can fill out a form or use Microsoft Word, then you already have all the skills you need to maintain your own site.) And did I mention we also provide unlimited customer service?

Your residents and visitors can now come to your website and learn what's going on in your town. Packed with information and dozens of useful features, your new site will capture everyone's attention and help streamline communications with your residents.

So having a superior website for your city or town is now easy and affordable – once you know where to go! And if you don't love it, you don't pay a dime.

GETTING A DOMAIN NAME

We should also mention that it's very worthwhile to register your own domain name (e.g. *yourwatersystem.com* or *yourcityname.com*). Fortunately, owning your own domain is actually very easy and inexpensive. As long as it's not already taken, you can secure it through any domain registrar (such as GoDaddy or Register.com) for roughly \$15/year or less.

We encourage our customers to register their domain themselves – so that you are listed as the owner, and not someone else. Once you own it you can easily point the domain to whatever server or service where your site is hosted. And if you ever move your site to another host or provider, you can take your domain with you.

ABOUT OUR COMPANY

I have to admit, before we launched our service in 2011, we were not 100% sure whether water systems would see the value. We are proud to now provide websites for over 400 towns and water systems across North America. And we are honored and excited that NYRWA has chosen to partner with us to bring our service to even more of their members. We are grateful to be of service to every single one of them.

One of our wonderful customers wrote to us recently: *"Purchasing our website from Rural Water Impact is the single BEST decision I've made in the 3 years I've been here! ... You have made my life so much easier on a day-to-day basis."*

We like to think this means we're doing something right. 💧💧

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