



**R**ecently, I was asked to consult with a small water system, which shall remain nameless, about a board election issue. Because I wasn't familiar with this system, I automatically logged onto their Web site in order to get some background information on the board seats and terms. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to find out that they didn't have a Web site at all. As it turned out, they also didn't have current bylaws, good meeting minutes or many of the procedures in place that I consistently write about. No wonder they weren't sure about which board member lived in which district or if they had complied with election procedures. In this day and age, there is no excuse for not having a Web site. Can you imagine how great it would be to have customers pay online? To post your CCR instead of mailing it out? To send a newsletter with a click of a button? Well you can and you should be doing all of this through a Web site! And you will find that creating a Web site will be the perfect barometer for your system's weather! If you cannot provide the content needed to create a Web site, then that should be a huge wakeup call to your board and management.

During the last ten years or so, lots of small systems have looked at me like I was crazy when I have asked them why they didn't have a Web site. "It's too expensive." "We aren't that big." "It's too complicated." "What would we post on it?" Those were a just few of the responses. Hey, you're talking to someone who doesn't even have a Facebook page, so it's not like I'm some tech guru. But I know that if your office staff are still processing payments manually and you are still mailing out your

CRR or answering the same questions about connections and shutoffs again and again and again, then you need a Web site!

So one myth is that it's too expensive and difficult to set up a Web site. Let's debunk that so that we can discuss all the great content you need to put up on that Web site. KRWA has affordable services to set up your domain, host your site, and provide ongoing technical support. NRWA has recently launched the Affiliate Program with RuralWaterImpact.com to provide

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**Miami RWD 2's Web site** came online last year and it is an excellent indicator of how well run this district is. I would also like to add that they have a slick Facebook Page which links to their Web site and that is a great idea as well. There really isn't anything about this Web site that I don't like. It's easy to navigate and would be very simple for a customer to use. Bill payment options, including the forms for Electronic Payment Authorization are readily available. The minutes AND the agenda from previous board meetings are posted. There's a great calendar that shows when electronic payments are withdrawn, late fees applied and board meetings take place. There's even a map of the service area of the district, and you know how I always want systems to have a map! I also really, really like the fact that in addition to staff, the board members are clearly identified with full contact information. What would I tweak? I'd really like to see the rates and fees section completed, because I think this is such an important piece of information to make available, especially in light of the territorial agreement that they worked so hard on. However, I am aware that there were some complicated rate formulas that resulted from that settlement and I am sure that they are working on the best way to present that information. I'm also a lawyer and a bit of a geek, so I'd be happy seeing a link to the actual territorial agreement itself. And yes I realize that I am the only person who would want to read that!

I'd also like to see the subdistricts listed on the service area map. Then the terms and subdistrict of each board member could be listed next to their names. Clearly, this is not a district which has trouble finding dedicated board members willing to serve, but for other, less fortunate districts, this is a great way to get the word out that new candidates are



needed. If it's possible, it would be great to pop a link to the agenda for the upcoming meeting onto the scrolling bulletin – this is a feature I love by the way, and it is maintained directly by the office staff, so it can be quickly modified to send out notices of water leaks, or other system emergencies. The only other nitpicking comment I have is that the bylaws posted aren't a signed PDF. But heck, I'm just so impressed that they have current bylaws and rules and regs, that I can forgive that. I also wondered of the original incorporation documents were available because having them along with the bylaws and rules and regs would be a nice tidy package. All in all I give it an A!

similar types of Web site design and maintenance. And there is nothing to stop you from finding a local web designer to design and manage your Web site. So clearly I'm not buying the argument that it's too expensive to have a Web site. It will save you money in man hours in the long run, and truthfully, in this day and age, it is something that your customers deserve. It is also probably the most effective solution to the majority of the management problems that I write about in my articles.

The tricky part comes when you have to provide the web content. THAT is what will quickly make you realize whether or not you have a well-run system, because the items that you should be posting on your Web site are the things that you should already have if your system is well-run: by-laws, policies and procedures, service applications, board minutes, a system map. Your Web site is a snapshot of your system and the goal is for any new customer to be able to learn whatever they need to know without calling the office.

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That said, let's look at examples of two really great small system Web sites. Miami County (Kansas) RWD 2 ([www.ruralwater2mico.com](http://www.ruralwater2mico.com)) with about 3,500 customers and Rural Water District 5, Rogers County, OK ([www.rogerswd5.com](http://www.rogerswd5.com)) with about 4,800 customers. They are both excellent Web sites and are wonderful examples of what a Web site can do for your system and what a Web site should contain. Of course I do have some comments about things I would like to see, but I've never met a lawyer who could leave well enough alone and not make some change to a document, no matter how good it was! And I should also admit that I'm always happy to give a shout out to RWD #2 Miami because of the way they stepped up to the table in 2007 and worked on a territorial agreement with Paola. (See *The Kansas Lifeline*, July 2008



**Rogers County, OK RWD 5** also has a slick Web site. I like the “Alerts” feature that lets you sign up for text or email notifications. That is very handy feature. The link for online bill pay was also easy to spot and navigate. The clear explanation of the rates and how much an estimated bill would be were also helpful. I was particularly impressed by the detailed payment instructions and the clear explanation of how the various forms of payment were handled. I would prefer to see the exact amount of the reconnect fee listed, just as an

encouragement to folks to pay on time. The meter reading explanation was also wonderfully clear. It had pictures! I’m pretty sure that even I could have figured it out! The FAQ section was a great idea and covers the basic questions that so many customers have: why is my water cloudy, what causes spots on my dishes, etc. The section on current and future project updates is an excellent idea, because it can educate the customers about the need for rate increases and certainly helps make them feel like their district is working hard for them. The blog was a very nice touch. Kudos to whomever wrote it!

However, there were few things missing that I would like to see added. Due to the fact that virtually every small system is a created under state law, I will always want to see the formation documents, current bylaws and rules and regs. Those should be posted on every Web site in my opinion. And the board members should have their contact information, subdistrict and term posted in addition to the number of years they have served. Wow! A shout out to Martin B. Howard, though. He has been on the board for 32 years and exemplifies the folks who work so hard and give so much of their free time to make our small systems successful. It would also be helpful to see archived minutes and agendas from previous meetings, so that the public has a sense of what business gets conducted at meetings. I was also surprised to see that no emails were listed for personnel. That may be a district policy, but in my experience it is far more efficient to have customers send email because it cuts down on phone calls and also creates a paper trail, so to speak, for those customers who are agitated. All in all, I give this Web site an A-, but only because the legal documents were missing and contact info for board members wasn’t listed.

“Paola, Miami RWD 2 territorial agreement – process for the future”). Of course I see Web sites as so much more than a way to facilitate electronic payments and easily send out CCRs. A Web site can help solve some of the chronic management/communication/reputation problems that plague small systems by getting customers informed and involved. Board vacancies are a recurring problem. One solution is to have your Web site clearly list the terms for the various board seats, the qualifications for board members, and the location of subdistricts. That way interested residents, or maybe folks who didn’t know they could even BE a board member may step up. In Kansas, only “participating members” are eligible to serve on RWD boards. So listing the board terms, filing deadlines, and dates of the election can really help get qualified candidates to throw their hats in the ring. The same holds true for bond elections. If a system needs to pass revenue bonds in order to obtain USDA financing, the best place to make that case is the Web site. An

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informed electorate is always more receptive to making improvements, and the same holds true for rate increases.

Yes! Explain your rates on your Web site and discuss why an annual rate review is necessary! If customers understand what projects are planned and what they cost, then they are more likely to accept rate increases. As a big believer in open and transparent communications between customers and boards, your Web site is a huge force multiplier. Use it a check to see if your operations are in compliance and then take it to the next step and use it to communicate with your customers and keep your board engaged!

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