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Welcome to MyEcoVille

An environmental website template that allows local governments and organizations to educate, promote and increase municipal waste diversion and sustainability efforts, MyEcoVille has been a flourishing effort since first coming on the scene several years ago. Details of this thriving online destination for local recycling and sustainability information are provided.

BY JONAH LEVINE AND RICK PENNER

In 2007, the Georgia Recycling Coalition (GRC) decided it was ready for a new website. At the time, the recycling association was spending \$375 per quarter on hosting and technical support fees for a site that was difficult to navigate and needed a fresh, modern update that served both its members and the public.

Creating a new website seemed necessary, but was a daunting task, which no one in the organization was keen to undertake. “I knew how time consuming projects like this could be,” expressed Gloria Hardegree, GRC executive director.

Instead of building a new website from scratch, the GRC subscribed to a new service called MyEcoVille, an environmental website template built on a content management system (CMS). The CMS allows GRC staff to add or edit website content at any time with only basic computer skills. The design of MyEcoVille enables organizations to easily adopt and use web technology to educate the public about sustainability.

Configuration of GRC’s MyEcoVille site began in the summer of 2008. Content was added, a directory of recycling facilities was imported, graphical elements were customized to localize the home page, and, presto change, the GRC had a new site in time for its annual conference in August. “We were impressed by the setup

process, handled by a GRC summer intern,” said Hardegree. “In no time at all, we had a great-looking, better-performing website up and running.”

Multiple MyEcoVille tools became immediately available to GRC, including an events calendar, video upload functionality, a recycling directory linked to Google Maps, and more. “The features that we wanted in our website, and more, were already built into MyEcoVille,” stated Hardegree. GRC was also happy to be able to keep its initial URL, www.georgiarecycles.org, which was redirected to the new MyEcoVille site.

Financial terms for the service were also attractive. MyEcoVille is offered as software as a service (SaaS) and as a template, and both these aspects make it affordable and value-packed compared to a custom website. Rather than paying a lot up-front for a custom website (design and development), MyEcoVille is purchased as an annual subscription. This service includes dedicated support, maintenance, hosting and daily data back-up. While customizable, there are several design features that are replicated for all MyEcoVille clients, which reduce the cost of each MyEcoVille site. As new features are developed, they are made available to all clients, increasing the value of MyEcoVille at a relatively low cost.

Further, the GRC benefited from the sponsorship option

that MyEcoVille offers, as they decided to partner with a local business that agreed to sponsor the site. Specific sections of each MyEcoVille site are reserved to feature sponsors and advertisers, if desired. There is a revenue-sharing program available to MyEcoVille host organizations, which can offset the costs of the system, or even help the host to generate revenue. Through sponsorship, in this case by Coca Cola Recycling, MyEcoVille is available to the GRC at no cost. This enables the GRC to allocate its human and financial resources to actively promoting the coalition's site, as well as its other promotion and education goals.

One of the GRC's goals for the website was for it to become a clearing-house for environmental information and education, and a recent honor suggests it has achieved just that. Last November, the coalition was honoured with the "Best Eco Service of 2009" award, bestowed by the local award-winning monthly general-interest publication, *Atlanta Magazine*. The MyEcoVille site was noted as an important contributing factor in this honor. And, with this sort of success being experienced in Georgia, Coca Cola Recycling has since decided to sponsor sites in Tennessee (see Profiling Tennessee sidebar), North Carolina and South Carolina.

In addition to the aforementioned states, several communities and counties are, too, subscribing to this environmental website template. Table 1 includes a list of MyEcoVille host organizations, as well as links to their sites.

The MyEcoVille idea

MyEcoVille is the creation of Emerge Knowledge Design, Inc. (EKD), developers of Re-TRAC, the prominent online waste and recycling information management system used by governments (municipal, county and state), universities and businesses to collect, organize and analyze waste and recycling program information.

Over the many years of working with Re-TRAC clients, Emerge Knowledge officials were receiving requests to develop a creative way to publish online recycling information and Re-TRAC reports for residents and businesses to easily access. At the time, it quickly became apparent to EKD that many environmental organizations did not have adequate, or affordable, online tools to support their promotion and education campaigns.

Through their work, Emerge Knowl-

Table 1 | Current, and future, MyEcoVille sites

| Host | Link |
|---|---|
| Georgia Recycling Coalition | www.georgiarecycles.org |
| Recycling Marketing Cooperative for Tennessee | http://tn.myecoville.com |
| Carolina Recycling Association | http://nc.myecoville.com |
| | – and – |
| Monroe County, Michigan | http://sc.myecoville.com |
| Spartanburg County, South Carolina | http://monroe.co.mi.myecoville.com |
| Lucas County, Ohio | http://spartanburg.myecoville.com |
| Keep Norfolk (Virginia) Beautiful | http://lucas.co.oh.myecoville.com |
| | http://usetheblue.org |
| MyEcoVille sites coming soon | |
| Hillsborough County, Florida | City of Rock Hill, South Carolina |
| York County, South Carolina | Province of Manitoba, Canada |

edge was also aware that non-profit environmental organizations have limited financial and web development resources. This is sometimes the case in the public sector, too. In fact, in many public sector environments, in-house expertise theoretically supplants financial resources. In practice, however, decision makers often de-prioritize the requests of environmental or recycling departments for IT support. Altogether, this situation leaves many organizations without a great promotion and education website, or the resources to develop one.

Faced with limited financial resources, organizations are forced to cut corners by contracting with novice web developers, seeking pro-bono help, or depending on limited in-house expertise. Amateur websites, or unresponsive developer service, can

allowing organizations to have their Re-TRAC data, including reports and program and facility information, linked to their MyEcoVille site. This was found to be an efficient way to make current information easily available to residents.

Driving this concept of a customizable website template is the CMS that MyEcoVille is built upon. All content and the menu structure can be updated using the CMS. Only basic computer skills are required by host organization staff to maintain a MyEcoVille site. In addition to the content, there are graphical features that clients can customize. This includes a prominent location for an organizational logo to achieve client-branding and a graphically-immersive community image on the main page of each site (to note: MyEcoVille hosts can get Emerge Knowledge to edit this image to include local landmarks or natural features).

"The community map really drew me to MyEcoVille. I especially love that it also doubles as a navigation menu," said John Deuel, executive director of Keep Norfolk (Virginia) Beautiful. "From my background promoting greater environmental awareness, I know that this will complement the standard navigation menu. MyEcoVille addresses the learning styles of left- and right-brained people." With this sort of localization possible, at such a low price, communities and non-profits of all types have a quality website within their reach.

"We didn't want to cut corners," said Mary Lynn Eaddy, recycling coordinator for Spartanburg County, South Carolina. "We were seeking a solution that met all our needs and still was reasonably priced. With MyEcoVille, we got everything we wanted."

By providing communities of all sizes with an effective and affordable environ-

"MyEcoVille addresses the learning styles of left- and right-brained people."

result when following these paths. Also, website maintenance may not be available, or the costs for this may not be fully included with these options, and these costs can quickly add up.

Given these resource concerns, and the requests to develop a great way to publish Re-TRAC reports, EKD developed the MyEcoVille concept: A sector-specific website template that host organizations could update themselves. The concept integrated a series of valuable built-in features, including Re-TRAC integration,

Profiling Tennessee

The Recycling Marketing Cooperative of Tennessee (RMCT) recently launched its statewide MyEcoVille site for The Volunteer State. The site includes a new feature: Robust community and county profile subpages. These subpages allow municipal and county recycling and solid waste professionals to provide localized information to their residents.

Residents of Dickson County, for example, can find local information about recycling facilities, recycling news, recycling reports and litter programs by going to the subpage of the statewide site containing Dickson County-specific content. Municipalities and counties can purchase a subpage and customize their presence on the statewide MyEcoVille site.

Because the State of Tennessee is also using Re-TRAC to collect facility, program

and tonnage information from counties every year, much of the content of the Dickson County subpage can be automatically generated (and updated) from the State's Re-TRAC system.

This ensures the information remains fresh and reduces the time required to update subpages.

Not long after launching the Tennessee MyEcoVille site, many parts of the state were severely impacted by a deluge of flood waters that resulted in significant waste clean-up needs. Thanks to the simple updating process of the site, the RMCT was able to quickly create a "Flood Debris Management" section that provided Tennesseans a resource to help manage and responsibly divert debris, including supplying county and Federal

Community Recycling Information



Emergency Management Agency information and debris management resources.

"We are pleased to welcome this dynamic recycling information resource," said James Aydelott, RMCT executive director, when asked to reflect on the new MyEcoVille system. "Tennesseans now have access to local and statewide recycling information, conservation news and events, and a rich online library of environmental education material."

mental website option, MyEcoVille will no doubt continue to grow. This will help to ensure that every community has an interesting and robust go-to site for local environmental information. Thanks to the innovative design of MyEcoVille, this growth will also help to bring together environmental educators everywhere, leveraging their collective efforts to continually improve the overall system. **RR**

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The authors would like to thank Michael Alexander, currently the president of RecycleAway, providers of recycling receptacles and consulting services. Alexander worked with Emerge Knowledge Design in 2008 to help develop the MyEcoVille concept. He

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For more information, contact Emerge Knowledge Design at (888) 600-3907, or view a demonstration video online at www.MyEcoVille.com/video.

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