

Easter Seals Forges Link Among Sites

By Kristen Bremner

When Easter Seals relaunched its Web site two years ago, it had a national database of 500 e-mail addresses. That total has skyrocketed to 35,000 through the group's new online network.

Easter Seals is the largest organization in the United States that provides services to people of all ages with disabilities. The more than 80-year-old nonprofit is a federation, which means it's an organization of affiliates, with its national headquarters in Chicago. It has 90 affiliates nationwide.

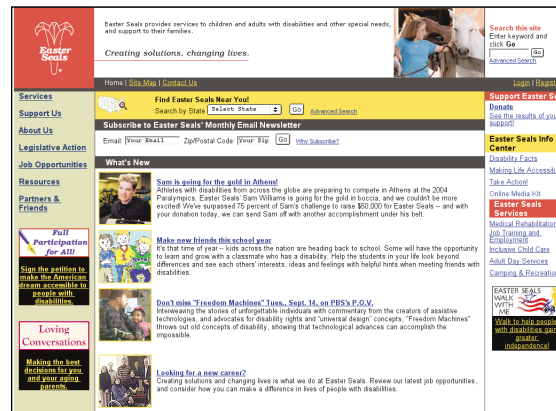
Though the headquarters and many affiliates had Web sites, there was no consistency among them and little was done by way of e-mail, said Shirley Sexton, director of Internet marketing at Easter Seals.

"What we had was a mess as far as the Internet," she said. "In the absence of an integrated strategy, each one of the affiliates had created their own Web sites independently, and, as a result, there was no consistency in the experience that our constituents were getting online."

Three years ago, Easter Seals set out to create a strategy to provide an integrated, consistent experience across all of the group's Web sites. It called the initiative the Easter Seals Online Network. The organization chose application service provider Convio as its technology platform and partner for the project.

"Two and a half years ago we signed the contract with Convio, and two years ago we launched the first 11 Web sites including the national site," Sexton said. "Since then, we have been transitioning our affiliate sites in waves of 10."

Easter Seals has more than 120 Web sites counting affiliates, event sites and grant sites. Only 14 are left to be relaunched, she said. The organization set a goal for 100 percent



Easter Seals' Web-related effort has produced an increase in online donations, rising to \$300,000 in the past year from a previous total of \$70,000.

participation by the end of fiscal 2005, which began Sept. 1.

Each affiliate site contains content from the national site. Affiliates are urged to update their local content monthly. Another important feature of the new sites is the call to action on every page to sign up for the Easter Seals e-mail newsletter. Users need only to type in their e-mail address and ZIP code to get the appropriate newsletter for where they live.

"We create local content for every affiliate, and we have every ZIP code in America mapped to one affiliate so the person would get the correct version of the newsletter," Sexton said. "Next year we plan to further customize the newsletters for certain recipients such as former clients and staffers."

Gene Austin, CEO of Convio Inc., Austin, TX, said Easter Seals' approach is unusual for national groups with affiliates.

"Among the large national organizations we work with, it is still the exception rather than the rule to have a coordinated strategy with affiliates as far as the Web is concerned," he said. "I'm not aware of any federation that has done this with its affiliates."

Austin said Easter Seals' input helped drive Convio to be more innovative in areas like managing multiple sites.

"Ease of use and accessibility are key issues for Easter Seals because affiliates often do not have large staffs and are often volunteer run, so people need to be able to jump on the system and use it very simply," he said.

Since the launches of the new sites began, 30,000 people have signed up for the newsletters and another 5,000 signed up for things like its walkathon.

Aside from inclusion of its Web address on direct mail pieces, Sexton said many people search the organization out on the Web. To drive more people to the Web, she said, Easter Seals will include

calls to action in its annual calendar direct mail package this year. It also plans to try to get more information from its e-mail newsletter subscribers.

"We didn't want to ask for a lot of data upfront when people signed up for the newsletter because I firmly believe that you can ask for more information later when people are more strongly bonded to the organization," Sexton said.

Online advocacy efforts such as petitions give users reasons to provide more information, she said. Later this year the organization also plans to conduct an e-mail survey.

Another result of Easter Seals' Web initiative has been a rise in online donations. Though the total donations are small compared with direct mail-generated ones, the gifts are much larger on average. The profile of Easter Seals' direct mail donors is an average age of 72 and average donation of \$12 compared with age 50 and \$60 online.

"In the past year we raised \$300,000 across the organization online compared to \$70,000 the year before," Sexton said. ■



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