



8 Tips for Launching a Company Intranet

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Many small-business owners get it when it comes to the influence and reach of the Internet. But what they may not fully appreciate is how that medium can be used exclusively within their own business.

Planning and programming an intranet — an internal Web site restricted to those within your company — can prove a boon to communication, project management and a host of other responsibilities. But using it effectively means more than building it, plugging it in, and letting it rock.

With software such as Windows SharePoint Services, a private Web site could also easily be converted into an "extranet," which is a restricted site that serves an internal audience but also allows in selected outside partners and others. Extranets are particularly useful when outside vendors are key members of project teams.

Here are eight dos and don'ts for launching an intranet (or extranet).

1. First, determine your employees' wants (and needs). Don't just lay out gobs of cash for the latest technology on the assumption that it'll do the job you need. Step one in formulating an effective intranet programming strategy is delineating just what you want it to do and with whom. Talk with the people who will access the system to get a sense of what they genuinely want and will consistently use. "Stakeholders within the company, which can include communications, human resources, information technology and sales, need to be heard," says Toby Ward, president of Prescient Digital media, a Toronto-based consulting concern. "Their input needs to be incorporated into the final form and function."

2. Assign an administrator to manage the internal site. Whoever manages your company network might be a logical choice for this role. But it also could be you, the business owner. An administrator usually is the site programmer, but he or she also supervises who has access to the site and to what areas of the site, plus who can create and delete files, and so on. But, before you get too carried away in complicating things with varying levels of access permissions, see tip No. 3.

3. For users' sake, keep your starter site simple. The potential of an intranet is remarkable. You can share pictures and information, work on projects in a single location, post announcements, schedules and calendars, share files, and utilize a host of other useful capabilities. But don't approach all those features like a sailor on shore leave. As a rule, it's best to keep an intranet — particularly a new one — simple to learn and simple to use. "Employees aren't going to use an intranet that requires an advanced degree in psychology to navigate," notes Pedro Sostre, creative director of Sostre and Associates, an intranet design firm in Miami. "Only include features that are relevant to your business to avoid clutter." (For more on some programming features you may want to include, see this article.)



4. Make it as secure as possible. As mentioned already, some intranet-software packages can be converted into "extranets" to allow access to a select number of people outside the company. These should be trusted partners and others with whom your company collaborates. But many companies may be better served by sealing off their private Web site to all outsiders, so that sensitive data and communications are kept within the company. Whether or not you choose to provide access to selected outsiders, you must make effective security an absolute programming must. Investigate various security options to determine which one will afford the best protection. "Many small businesses think that just because they're a mainstream company, they're off the radar for hackers. But that just isn't true," Sostre says. "There are several ways to password-protect an intranet, such as Web-protecting the folder or using a simple password verification script."

5. Keep things safe on the inside as well. Just because you have an intranet doesn't mean carte blanche for every employee user. Nothing can prove more destructive to an intranet than an inexperienced user who wanders into an area and inadvertently damages something he or she shouldn't have had access to in the first place. So, keep things open but not unduly open. "Employees have been known to make mistakes with an intranet," Sostre says. "Any advanced functions such as deleting files, editing projects and updating news should only be available to administrators. That way, others won't accidentally delete an important file or update news with inaccurate information."

6. Aggressively test your system. Even the best-planned intranet may contain glitches. Before offering company-wide access, test the system to make sure it operates properly. In particular, check out how it functions when several users are running the system at the same time. "Never forget to load test," says Josh Morgart, network administrator for Expetec, an Aberdeen, S.D., technology concern. "Assign several users to go through the motions and use the forum for weeks ahead of time to ensure smooth operations."

7. Make it easy to update. Another common mistake, particularly with companies that are new to intranets, is assuming that the network is cast in stone. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just as you should with the rest of your business, plan on growth and changes to your intranet. One way to do that proactively is to install an intranet whose function and capability exceed your current needs. "Do remember to plan for growth. Nothing ruins an intranet more than when it's inaccessible," Morgart says. "Make sure you plan for growth of the number of users by taking your current user base and multiplying it by three to offer a nice cushion for growth. That way, you can avoid having to switch servers or having to shut down the server completely."

8. Watch your (programming) language. One final element to planning for smooth growth is starting with a language that can be easily updated as your intranet needs growth and change. As is the case with other elements to do with your intranet, the simpler, more seamlessly things happen, the better your system will function. "Make sure to use an easily updateable language," Morgart says. "For instance, we chose ASP because it really doesn't change much, if at all. Others may require downtime and upgrades if certain things are changed from release to release."

Contact Mark DeKeersgieter at (309)664-8146 for information on how Integrity Technology Solutions can help your organization launch an intranet.

