Rethinking the IMA Web Presence

IMA hopes to become a true community resource.

IMA's existing web presence is of the sort normally associated with a "Web 1.0" label. It is a one-dimensional service created by a single organization from a single perspective. While it has served its purpose to some extent, it has some limitations. For both technical and strategic reasons, it cannot possibly expand to meet the changing needs of the audience it is intended to serve.

A single organization with limited resources is completely dependant upon itself only, and its strengths and capabilities are based on the work done by a limited number of hands. A community-based operation has the advantage of building exponentially, on itself, in a broadly focused, needs-based manner by using the strengths, capabilities and hands of its entire membership.

Although IMA has been mostly built by the efforts of a small group of individuals, its existence has facilitated cooperation amongst an entire community. That community has grown significantly and for a number of reasons. IMA may in fact have been the very reason that the web community surrounding public broadcasting has become as tightly knit as it has. Without IMA, groups may not have had a venue within which to congregate, or a forum within which to debate.

The annual IMA Conference has become the spark which has ignited many other significant initiatives. It is a meeting place, training center, board room and social club all at once. It provides opportunities for discovery, investigation and cooperation. The combination of presentations, discussions, workshops, and lectures makes it possible for participants at all levels in the web knowledge/experience spectrum to benefit in some significant manner. A community of individuals and organizations has formed around the idea that the internet is something that pubcasters "should be doing". That community has grown stronger, and as this has happened, its needs have expanded and diversified.

It is now time for IMA to become a part of that community which it has helped to create.

We believe that by taking the concept of the IMA Conference and expanding it, enhancing it, improving it, and finally moving it online, we can put IMA in the center of this community on a year-round basis. Feedback has been provided by IMA members and other conference participants that would indicate that there is room for improvement in the conference itself. By following these leads and using them as the basis for a needs assessment, we can further understand what members truly want and need to get from IMA. We will then create a scalable web model based on those needs that can grow and change as necessary over time. This model will be "created" by and for its own members by utilizing social networking concepts and tools.

What is the IMA community?

IMA's own community can be defined as pubcasters who have taken or would like to take their broadcasting operation online. Other communities with a connection or possible connection to IMA include the Open Source community and communities of other non-commercial media (not including traditional "public" broadcasters).

What are the elements of the "resource"?

In light of the ideas notated here, a "true community resource" might serve multiple audience types, and might do so by providing not only a library of tools and information, but also a place for gathering, sharing and communicating, wherein the community members can experience needs fulfillment by way of interdependence between other members.

Project Needs, as stated by IMA:

- User-centric architecture, design and content
- Knowledge base for Tech, Design/Architecture and Marketing
- Tech support for stations in need
- Interaction between and within multiple communities
- Stronger community bonds among "web-tech" oriented pubcasting staff
- More opportunities for peer networking
- More opportunities for shared learning
- Decentralization of information exchange
- Expanded input into policy and practice development
- Expanded IMA membership
- Increased IMA membership value

If one were to ask most pubcasting web staff, one would not be surprised to find that a great deal of what is actually needed is simply "help". When staff is limited and budgets are tight, finding solutions to common problems is not always easy. Small and mid-sized stations are most sensitive to these issues. Tools and resources that are easy to use and easy to find are a treasure when time and money are available in limited quantities.

These greatly needed tools and resources should be complimented with forums for sharing information. Blogs, RSS feeds (in and out), bulletin boards and possibly a wiki can all be used for sharing information, articles, assistance and leads to other online sources of information at other sites.

Service Structure

Although our following thoughts can only be considered preliminary and incomplete at this point, our initial concept is to structure the new IMA web service starting with the website itself, then Email contact, following with a system of web conferences, live online technical support, and finally direct tech support service via telephone. We propose a six-tier structure. Keep in mind these are structural tiers for the purpose of conceptualization, not navigational levels.

Tier One

The top tier of the service structure would be based on what might be familiar to some as the classic, "Propeller-head, Ponytail, Suit" technique of Website Management. This concept divides the service into three basic segments:

Technical and Programming	Design and Architecture	Business, Sales and Marketing
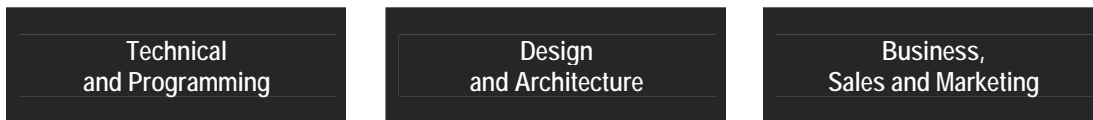
This gives the web service a simple, easy to understand, almost brandable theme. Web veterans may be familiar with the services and communities that formed in the late 90's around websites such as Webmonkey.com, Evolt.org and Digitalweb.com. These sites were and still are widely known as key resources for web professionals of all calibers. Their success could easily be attributed to their simple site structures, which broke discussion topics and articles into the basic elements of website design and development, making it easy for those with either limited knowledge or time to find what they needed quickly, return to it easily, and refer colleagues to it in simple language.

As we are attempting to provide a similar, albeit more current and somewhat more industry-specific service, it makes sense to observe these tested models, following their leads in hopes of becoming even slightly as essential as they were at one time.

Tier Two

At the second tier below this, we see a division of service types. For each of the Tier One elements, there will be the three sub elements of Tier Two.

Tools, Services and Utilities	Articles and Information	Discussion, Sharing and Opinion

Once again, returning to proven models from history, good web design and development information sites have provided one or all of the above types of resources to visitors. Some site visitors will be most interested in getting immediate satisfaction: "I need an RSS parser." Some visitors, inclined to take a do-it-yourself approach to their own site, will seek information for researching whatever their current project might be. They'll want tutorials, the latest industry news,

trends and techniques, as well as case studies and whitepapers. Lastly, most all visitors will be interested in sharing information, tools, and ideas. This encourages the sense of community and also serves to decentralize the process of disseminating information to that community.

Tier Three

The third tier is the level at which we provide actual content and services. For each of the Tier Two elements, there will be the following possible content/service types.

- Code downloads including visitor-submitted procedural code and complete applications
- Web service references, such as recommendations for streaming services, membership ASP's, etc.

- Tutorials and other instructional materials
- Industry News
- RSS Feeds from outside IMA
- Case studies
- Whitepapers and similar tech docs
- IMA Conference presentations and media

- Topical discussion forums
- IMA Member blogs
- IMA Guest Contrib. blogs
- Project/Employment listings
- Content offerings
- Polls & Surveys
- Contests & Awards
- Public Knowledge Base (wiki)

Tier Four

Tier four is about direct contact. From the various content and service elements for each of the various site segments we will automatically generate regular Email updates for use in maintaining contact with visitors who have expressed an interest in those subjects. In addition, editors and/or contributors should be elected to write more personalized, content-rich messages to go out on a less frequent, but just as regular basis. A fantastic example of this communication strategy can be found at Sitepoint.com.

Tier Five

At tier five, we coordinate live events. Web conferences, presentations and live discussion will be scheduled and promoted via the website. While a web presence is certainly a helpful tool in creating community, it is our belief that a true community exists when real people have real interactions.

Topics will be determined based on actual discussion occurring in online forums, as well as on visitor suggestion. In addition, we plan to invite guest speakers and presenters from within the pubcasting sector and also from adjacent sectors (such as the Open Source and commercial web development communities, as well as other commercial and non-commercial print and broadcast media if possible).

Among other, more obvious benefits, these discussions will undoubtedly serve to feed into larger sessions at the annual IMA Conference.

Tier Six

Although it is a narrower tier, it is quite significant. At tier six we will provide support options for site visitors who need help. From time to time, visitors will use the resources provided within the website and find them very useful, but will still need additional help from a human being. We suggest that it would be effective to offer volunteer positions to IMA members, wherein they could elect to become part of the live online support network.

Free live support software can be used to establish a network of community members who are willing to help other community members. If a volunteer is available and is at his or her PC, the client software connects to the server software to establish availability as a support person. In this way, it will be possible to meet the support requirements of a large community without putting an excess burden on paid IMA staff, as it would not be otherwise feasible.

In addition, technical support for community members will be available by phone, but this will likely be a paid service, as it will require IMA to maintain a qualified position on staff.

Technical and Business Considerations

At this time, it is not possible to create the web presence described here within the existing IMA web space. The content management system used to manage the site is not equipped to handle the multitude of services we intend to provide as part of this new service.

Furthermore, many of the types of applications we plan to utilize are already in widespread use around the internet, and are available with open source. Since most of these applications are designed to be used on a UNIX type web server, it will be necessary to host the new service on such a machine. We have numerous possibilities for hosting.

For these reasons, we suggest that the new IMA web presence be located under a new domain name, one which has already been registered, webresources.org. The existing IMA website would be scaled down slightly and used primarily as an institutional marketing space, promoting and publicizing the annual conference and highlighting key information about IMA activities. Integratedmedia.org would be focused on the organization; webresources.org would be focused on the community.