How to Make an Online Voter Guide
Quick Tips for the Voter Educator

Available online: http://www.calvoter.org/manual/quicktips.html

Provided by the California Voter Foundation,
publisher of the *California Online Voter Guide*
August, 2002

Abstract

I. Introduction

Participating in elections is challenging and time-consuming, even for the most dedicated voter. Before the Internet, voters seeking to access reliable information had few places to go. Today we have technology that can provide vast amounts of information to an unlimited number of people at very little cost. Not every voter will come online to seek election information, but millions of US voters already do and the numbers are increasing every year. Nationwide, one in three Americans used the Internet to get information about politics, news and campaigns in 2000, up from one in four in 1998, according to surveys conducted by the Democracy Online Project at George Washington University.

The Internet is also a great way to reach young people, who are more likely to be online and also more likely to be ignored by political campaigns. Journalists covering elections also need access to reliable information. With the Internet it is now feasible to inform anyone who is seeking help with elections. This change represents an enormous opportunity to help citizens become more effective participants in the electoral process, make truly informed choices, and vote with confidence.

These quick tips have been assembled by the staff of the California Voter Foundation (CVF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization advancing new technology to improve democracy. CVF published the first edition of the California Online Voter Guide in 1994; over the years and through subsequent editions the staff has learned a lot about how to create useful online election information on a limited budget.

While these suggestions are designed primarily to assist state and local government election agencies, they will also be useful to anyone interested in creating online voter guides, including nonprofit organizations, libraries, universities, and the news media.

These tips are not intended to be comprehensive; rather, they are a preview of a more detailed and complete online voter guide manual that CVF will release in Fall 2002. Your feedback on these "Quick Tips" will help CVF shape its manual -- please send your comments to info@calvoter.org. Special thanks are due to the AOL Time Warner Foundation whose generous support has made this Voter Guide Manual project possible.

II. Things to consider before you begin

There are a number of things to consider before deciding to publish an online voter guide, including the cost, possible financing options, the scope of your guide, and your potential audience, among others. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What resources (staff, time, money) can you devote to this effort?

- How will you finance your voter guide? Do you need to secure additional funding? Are there public or charitable funds available to support your effort? What is the timetable for requesting support?

- Who are the key staff people who will work on this project? Will you use an in-house technologist or hire a technology consultant?

- Who is your audience? Who do you expect will be using your online resources, and how will you meet their various needs?

- Does your agency serve communities who don't speak English as their primary language? If so, will you translate the contents of your online voter guide into other languages?

- How will you integrate the guide with your agency's other projects, web sites, and outreach efforts?

III. Getting started: planning and developing your voter guide

Planning is one of the most important stages in the development of your voter guide -- don't underestimate how helpful a good planning session can be and how much time it will save during actual production of the voter guide. A well-planned online voter guide will be easy for the user to navigate and easy for you to maintain.

- Develop a budget to get a realistic idea of how much your voter guide will cost. Creating a web site is inexpensive compared to publishing in print, but it's not free, and it will be helpful to plan ahead for your financial needs and resources.

- Feature content you have already created, including anything you normally publish in print, such as sample ballots and voter guides. Plan ahead to ensure this content is created in software programs that can be easily converted to the Web.

- Don't worry if your guide is incomplete upon its debut -- start with the basics and then add new features as you develop them, building your voter guide over the course of several weeks or months and expanding it as resources allow.

- Identify ahead of time which content in your voter guide will be "static", or unchanging, and which will be dynamic. Think ahead to how much effort it will take to keep your web pages updated during the election.

- Anticipate how often dynamic content will have to change. For example, if you link to campaign web sites you can either set a deadline for when campaigns have to submit their web site addresses and make that content static, or you can allow campaigns to submit web site addresses throughout the election season, which will be more useful to voters but will require more staff resources to maintain.

- Plan to archive your voter guide online after the election, in order to create a historical resource and accountability tool for the voters and others who are seeking to hold their elected officials accountable for their campaign promises.

IV. Content ideas for your online voter guide

Below is a list of the content and features to consider including in your guide. Start with this list or make your own list and prioritize the content to ensure the most important information is available online first:

- Information on how to become a candidate and/or how to qualify an initiative
- Lists of candidates and measures on the ballot, and campaign contact information
- Candidates' official campaign statements
- Candidate photos
- Links to official campaign web sites
- Texts and analyses of ballot measures
- Instructions for how to register to vote
- Instructions for how to request an absentee ballot
- Instructions for how to cast a ballot
- Instructions for how to use voting equipment
- Basic "Questions & Answers" about elections and voting
- Important election dates and deadlines for voter registration
- Polling place look-up tools
- Political district maps
- Campaign finance data
- Job descriptions for elected officials
- Contact information and links to official county and state election offices
- List of official political parties and their contact information
- Official election returns
- Links to other election resources

Other information resources voters need and value include news articles, voting records, ratings by interest groups, campaign pledges and statements, and independent analysis of local and state

measures. Such resources are often produced by nonpartisan organizations and the news media, and provide excellent material to feature in online voter guides.

V. Ensuring your voter guide is reliable and truly nonpartisan

Lots of people may visit your online voter guide when it first debuts and is getting media attention and referrals from other web sites, but how will you get those new visitors to become regular users of your site? It's simple: if your guide is reliable and accurate, and if people feel the information is nonpartisan and unbiased, they will come back to it throughout the election season for information they know they can trust. Here are some tips to help you create a voter guide web site that people want to return to year after year:

- Make accuracy the cornerstone of your guide; double check all information and data included in your guide and know its source; proof web pages as they are being created and again after they have been uploaded to the web site.

- Be truly nonpartisan -- include a statement of nonpartisanship in your voter guide and explain what you did to be fair and unbiased in creating the guide. Avoid both actual partisan behavior and the appearance of partisanship, being careful about how the language used in your voter guide could be interpreted. Even simple design issues, such as the order in which candidates are listed, can be construed as partisan.

- Treat all candidates of all parties (not just the two major political parties) equally and include information on all candidates in your online voter guide.

- If you link to resources provided by outside groups, make sure these Web sites are truly nonpartisan; if you want to link to one partisan or issue-oriented voter guide Web site, you should find and link to them all.

- Do not take positions on candidates, issues or ballot questions.

- Disclose how your voter guide is funded and where your agency or organization gets its money; don't accept funding from groups that have an interest in the outcome of the election.

- Create a privacy policy for your voter guide web site and stick to it. It is important to be up front with your users about your intentions if you hope to build their trust. If you are not asking users to register and not setting "cookies" to track visitors' actions then your privacy policy can simply state you are not engaging in such activities. If you are, provide an explanation to your users about the purpose for information gathering and what will happen to the data you gather.

VI. Technical issues: web site design, editing & hosting

There are many things you can do technically to improve the function and performance of your online voter guide, both for yourself and for the people using your guide. Avoid technological practices that create barriers to those trying to use your site. The last thing you want to do is limit the number of people who can benefit from the election information you've worked so hard to create.

- Determine the overall structure or "map" of your web site before you start.

- Designate a person in your agency who is responsible for uploading and updating your Web pages, and make sure everyone knows who it is.

- To maintain consistency throughout the Web site, determine your site colors, logo, page design and site map, and then create a page "template" that everyone uses when building new pages.

- Design your voter guide to be compatible with all major Internet browsers and test its performance on various platforms (PC and Macintosh) and browsers prior to going live with the guide. Nothing is more frustrating to a web user than being unable to access a web site on his or her browser of choice.

- Skip the fancy graphics, flashy java scripts, frames, cascading style sheets, and other complex Web page and site features. These will only add to the cost of your guide and can make your site less user-friendly. People appreciate a simple, cleanly designed guide with web pages that load quickly, are nice to look at and easy to navigate.

- Avoid using "cookies" to track visitors' movement around your site. Many people disable cookies in their web browser and may have trouble accessing your voter guide if it requires them. Many people also consider cookies to be annoying, or worse, a violation of their privacy -- better to avoid cookies unless technically necessary.

- If you ask site users to input their mailing or voting address in order to retrieve election information, make sure this isn't the only way to access the guide; the more you personalize the site based on address, the more you limit the number of people who will be able to access the data (such as non-voters or out-of-town reporters and others who will not show up in your registration database).

- Include a "date first published" and "date last updated" on each voter guide page.

- Feature your contact information prominently in the voter guide and consider listing separate email addresses for technical and election-related questions and suggestions.

- Don't require visitors to set up a user name and password to use the web site.

- Include a search tool, a site map, and a credits or "about this site" page as part of your voter guide. If you have the staff and financial resources consider including a polling place look-up feature, a "What are my districts?" look-up feature, and online, real-time election results.

- Add meta-tags with key words and phrases such as "voter information" and "election" to your web pages, so they will be picked up by Internet search engines.

- Consider using the web to collect information from candidates (i.e. an online form for submitting contact information); collecting this data electronically in the first place reduces data-entry, increases accuracy, and makes it easier for candidates to update their information with your office.

VII. Promoting and marketing your voter guide

You can build the most beautiful online voter guide on the Web, but you have to get the word out to make sure people use it. Here are some tips for developing a comprehensive outreach campaign to promote your online voter guide:

- Hold a news conference to launch your online voter guide. Computer screens and web pages make for good television clips and you will likely get a camera or two at your launch event, assuming it has been well publicized in advance.

- Take advantage of free media coverage by distributing news releases to announce the debut of your voter guide and to highlight new additions throughout the election season. Consider using a wire service such as PR Newswire or Ascribe. Cultivate relationships with local and capitol bureau reporters.

- Make sure your web site is listed in all the major search engines and web directories (like Yahoo! and Google). There are companies that will handle this for you for a fee, or you can request listings by visiting directories and search engines on your own.

- If you are a state or county government agency, make sure your site is prominently linked from the state or county home page in the weeks leading up to the election. Many people don't know which agency to go to for online election information and will start their search at the main state or county web site.

- Request reciprocal links from the web sites of nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and campaigns, that are included in your online voter guide.

- Create a free electronic newsletter that includes information and periodic updates about your voter guide. Build up your newsletter's distribution list by offering it to current and new contacts (and don't send it to people who have not requested it!)

- Integrate your voter guide web site address with other aspects of your agency or organization. For example, mention the site URL on your outgoing phone message, and include it on your stationary, business cards, and other printed materials.

- Encourage awareness of your voter guide via word of mouth. Ask site visitors to help spread the word and offer a publicity blurb they can send out via email, or add an "email this page to a friend" feature to your web site.

- Write a script for a 30 second public service announcement about your voter guide and ask radio stations to play it on the air in the weeks leading up to the election.

VIII. Collaboration, partnerships and volunteers

Reliable election information is a scarce resource, so it is important that those who produce it make sure their efforts complement, rather than duplicate, each other. By collaborating with others, you can strengthen relationships among groups working in the same field, and maximize limited resources. Here are some tips for successful partnerships:

- Partner with other voter educators in your area (government agencies, nonprofits, libraries, universities, and the news media) in order to leverage limited staff and financial resources. Partnerships can reduce publicity costs and improve awareness of your project.

- Collaborate with other groups that are producing voter education materials on the Internet -- coordination of various voter education projects improves the final product for the voters and makes it easier for the public to use online resources. Possible funders of voter guide work like to see evidence of collaboration and cooperation among various organizations working in the same field.

- Use volunteers and student interns to help build and maintain your online voter guide. While you do have to spend some time recruiting and training volunteers, a good volunteer or intern can contribute a lot to your effort.

IX. Avoiding legal problems

Election agencies and nonprofit organizations must be mindful of the need to remain strictly nonpartisan in their voter education efforts. Election agencies that engage in voter education activities in ways that benefit some candidates but not others may invite charges of abuse of public resources for political gain. Nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations that use charitable resources in a partisan way risk losing their tax-exempt status with the IRS.

In 1999 the Federal Election Commission cleared the way for state election agencies to use the Internet to facilitate voter education by clarifying that states can link to campaign web sites from official government web sites without violating the Federal Election Campaign Act. (See FEC Advisory Opinion #1999-7, available online from the FEC web site at: http://herndon3.sdrdc.com/ao/ao/990007.html for more information on this important FEC decision.) Below are some steps voter educators can take to avoid legal problems:

- Make sure all campaigns and candidates are given an equal chance to be featured in your voter guide.

- Include a disclaimer in your guide stating that all candidates have been invited to participate in your project.

- Leave the door open for candidates to add links and other information to your guide after its debut and design your web pages in a way that leaves a place for new information to be added at a later date.

- Link to campaign web sites and email addresses only, and avoid linking to incumbents' official web sites. Incumbent candidates with government-funded web sites are prohibited from using such government resources for campaign purposes.

- Follow the tips outlined in Section 5 to make sure your guide is truly nonpartisan.

X. Evaluating the success of your guide

Take time after the election to evaluate the success of your online voter guide and to determine whether it met the needs of those it was designed to serve. Here are some ways to measure your success:

- Include a user feedback form as part of your online guide. Ask for feedback about the guide's content and design, and solicit suggestions from users about additional information they would like to see in future guides.

- Track media coverage of your voter guide -- including print and online news stories, television stories, and radio interviews -- in order to evaluate whether your outreach efforts to the media were successful.

- Ask your web site hosting company or technology consultant for traffic statistics for your online voter guide. Learn the difference between the terms "hits", "page views" and "visits", and use these traffic statistics to determine peak traffic times and days, popular guide content and web pages, and number of visits to the site.