

[News and Hot Topics](#) » If Google Can't Find the People Who Lead
Volunteers, No One Can

If Google Can't Find the People Who Lead Volunteers, No One Can

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April
2015

Although our new Web site went live at the start of the year, we continue to work on the content, particularly fixing broken links (an unending battle for any site). One major project for me has been updating our section on [Professional Associations Serving Geographic Regions](#), formerly called the "DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) Directory." This is where we identify local, state/provincial, and national networks in which volunteer management practitioners become members and work together to build the profession – for their own career development and to promote volunteerism in general.

Energize has offered this type of DOVIA Directory for more than 20 years and at one time had as many as 200 local or state/provincial networks listed in North America alone. We used to post contact information such as a person's name, phone, and e-mail. But because most groups had no paid staff, these contacts changed as officers rotated, sometimes yearly, and then the outdated material effectively blocked anyone trying to get in touch. About a decade ago, DOVIAs finally began to start their own Web sites or at least Facebook pages. So for the new Energize site we decided only to list organizations that could be found in some way online. This assured the group still existed and eliminated the problem of manually changing contact information each year.

DOVIA List Dwindling

Right now I am greatly dismayed at how many professional societies in our field are completely invisible on the Web – effectively dead because they cannot be found through even a careful search.

Here is my process: If the link currently shown is broken, and for DOVIAs with no URL at all, I copy and paste the name of the group into Google. Then – if I get any hits at all – I click until I find one that seems to be accurate and current. I have been taken to outdated material, such as PDFs of past conference brochures, but without any online contact information printed on them. Sometimes I am redirected to the Web site of an organization in the same community, but cannot find any mention of

the DOVIA even by searching within that site (more on this in a moment). Finally, if nothing else has worked but I believe that some group does/should exist in this city, I use the generic search of “[city] [state]” + “volunteer management” + “association.” If all of that proves fruitless, I delete the association from our directory.

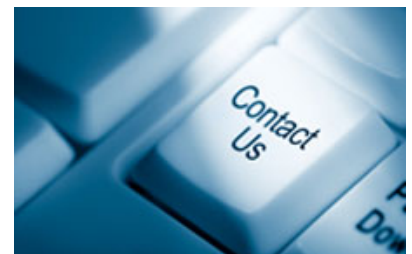
In this way, spending an average of fifteen minutes on each search, I estimate that I have had to remove *more than 50%* of the listings that used to be accurate on our site! I shake my head every time I hit “delete.” I really shuddered when I deleted Jersey Shore DOVIA in New Jersey because I had spoken at its inaugural meeting years ago and found several mentions of a high school scholarship the group gave annually, even as recently as 2014. Yet, after 30 minutes of searching found no contact information at all (even on the PDF of the application form for the scholarship, which *was* online!), I felt obligated to remove that group, too.

Just about everywhere I go in North America, I hear the lament: “We can’t seem to sustain our local association.” I have tried to analyze the variety of reasons our professional organizations are in trouble in previous Hot Topics, such as [Chicken or Egg: Why Are Our Professional Associations Weak?](#) (These are at the end of this essay, for those who want to read more).

Today, however, I am more interested in pointing out the problem of zero Web presence, because it is a vicious circle. If struggling associations were better at promoting what they do and reaching new potential members, they might grow.

Our Field Is Terrible at Web Communications...But We Can Get Better

The main reason why volunteer resources managers (VRMs) ignore the power of the Web is they do not own the medium. By that I mean that most VRMs are functionally removed from the staff at their organizations who create and maintain their Web site, and volunteer engagement is far down on the list of things to promote to the public. Not to mention that webmasters like to protest how much time and money it would take to do things – and we believe them. Too many VRMs accept this situation and can’t make the transition to the mindset that, in a professional network, they *can* do whatever they want online. And – surprise! – at no or little financial cost.



Next comes the misconception that it takes a vast amount of technical knowledge to create a Web presence (and that no one in volunteer management has that). Of course that may be true to support a huge site such as Energize's (and I do employ people skilled in online technology). But that is not what a local association of VRMs needs. Today there are many free platforms on which to build a Web site, especially designed for non-techies. And, yes, a Facebook page or LinkedIn group works, too, although you may limit visibility to only those who don't mind using such social media.

Here are the basics that a DOVIA would need to post. Add anything you want but start here:

- Its name at the top

- A mission statement describing what the group is all about
- The geographic area served (Be sure to clearly name the city, county/state/province, especially if your association's name is not specific. "Capital Area DOVIA" could be in many places and, yes, there *are* reasons why someone outside "your" capital might want to find you.)
- Membership information: who may join and how
- A clear announcement of the next meeting of the group: when, where, what, and how to register
- How someone can learn more

This can be accomplished in a single page. Really. But here's the key: it has to be kept **current**. All the information shown must be totally up to date and anything that has expired must be taken down as soon as it is over.

Create an organizational e-mail address (free on something like Gmail) which can always remain current as a point of contact and allow any site visitor to ask a question. Then, behind the scenes, you can rotate who is assigned to monitor those messages – and answer them, promptly!

Don't let your Web site age like a printed brochure frozen in time. Create an officer position for Web Strategist and charge that person with keeping the site updated and fresh, as well as post to other online forums for your association. On Facebook, that person (or any member) should put up a new comment at least twice a month to indicate, "We're alive!"

True Web presence is more than just a Web site. Every time your organization is mentioned on any other Web site, it adds to your searchability. Post an event you are sponsoring – or even your monthly meeting – to a local events site and it will come up if someone searches on just your name in a search engine. Encourage members to name their affiliation with the DOVIA in their online profiles, especially on Facebook and LinkedIn. Such mentions also come up on search engines.

Never assume this is wasted effort because you already "know" all the VRMs in your area. I assure you that you don't. Not to mention all the people who lead volunteers as only one part of their job (and therefore have a title that does not mention volunteers) who are unaware of the possibility of linking to others doing the same thing. That's the power of the Web: to find someone across the street whom you've never met.

National and state organizations supporting the volunteer field often include a "links" section on their site, but rarely go local with it. Ask yours to post your DOVIA's information and solicit others. State Commissions can really help by listing the professional associations scattered around the state – if only to make sure that the AmeriCorps members who have been given volunteer management roles know where to find nearby advice. Yes, it is a chore to keep these lists current, but it ought to be easier to do so regionally than nationally. (Ask for volunteer help!)

Buried under Sponsor Organizations

One of the things that has happened in some cities is that a formerly independent professional association has gone under the wing of a nonprofit or public agency, most often a volunteer center, United Way, or HandsOn affiliate. Regardless of whether or not that is a good thing, when such an agreement is made, DOVIA representatives should insist on not being submerged under other programs. They should negotiate for things such as visibility on the sponsor's Web site main page, links to one or more pages specifically for news they want to post, inclusion on the site map, and mention in the sponsor's publications such as its annual report.

What always irritates me is that so many of the sponsoring agencies are also the local site showing volunteer opportunities to the public, as if these positions and activities are somehow actively collected by them. In fact, the sponsor really, really needs the participation of their local organizations to voluntarily post their information and keep it current. That means having to be in communication with the people responsible for volunteer management, so why is that core audience invisible on these sites?

It would be so simple to have a box saying "Are you the person coordinating volunteers for your organization? Click here to connect with your peers." And then link to a page specifically for volunteer resources managers. This page could explain the local network, promote upcoming volunteer management training, share information about community-wide National Volunteer Week events, etc.

Call to Action

A loud bravo to all of the professional associations who do have solid Web sites and active Facebook pages! (If you want to see them, browse what's now left in [Professional Associations Serving Geographic Regions](#).) It's also important to note that the number of associations listed in other parts of the world has grown, so there is good news along with bad.

Please check to see whether your DOVIA is in the directory, with correct information. If it is not, ***please [submit it to us](#)!*** But only if you can supply a Web address or URL for others to learn more about it.

If this essay has moved you to explore putting your association online, be sure to report it and good luck.

And now it's your turn to comment, please.

Previous Hot Topics about Our Professional Associations

[Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?](#) July 1997

[Some Nagging Questions...](#) March 1998

[Wishes and Resolves for the New Year](#) January 2000

[A Utopian View of Volunteerism Professional Organizations](#) November 2002
[Chicken or Egg: Why Are Our Professional Associations Weak?](#) December 2004
[A Call to Action on Behalf of Our Profession](#) March 2006

Related Topics: [Social Media and Internet Technology](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on April 3rd, 2015

[Jayne Cravens](#), Portland, Oregon, United States

Other things that should be on the web site, IMO:

- The name of the organization IN TEXT, not just in a logo. This improves the chances of it being found by Google, Bing, etc.
- If these words aren't in the mission statement some how, they need to be somewhere on the page, within the text, if at all possible: volunteering, volunteers, volunteerism, community engagement, community service, help, nonprofits, association, group, professional, expert, expertise, unpaid, internships.
- Links to the Facebook page, Twitter account, blog, or any other social media associated with the group

And in the HTML code somewhere, put in all of the previously suggested keywords, as well as the word *dovia* - even if the group isn't using that word, it can help searchers find the association if that's what they are still using that phrase.

These SIMPLE steps will greatly improve the search results for a web site for an association of managers of volunteers.

Submitted on April 5th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Hi, Jayne -- All excellent adds. Thanks so much!

Submitted on April 4th, 2015

Sam Elliston , Trainer , Dare 2 Stand Up , Cincinnati, United States

Hi Susan,

I checked to see that Cincinnati was on the list (CincyCAVA) and they are there but the Miami Valley Volunteer Administrators Association didn't make it- they serve the Dayton area, their web site is www.MVAVA.org and they are going great guns. Sorry you had deleted them. Can you add them back?

I am glad you brought this up - I had no idea other communities didn't have the same web presence we are lucky enough to have here.

Keep it up- you always have something to teach me .

Submitted on April 5th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thanks, Sam -- MVAVA is once again back in our directory! But here's some feedback that you might like to give to the group. "Miami Valley" is meaningless outside of Ohio and -- to most of the country -- would imply a Florida-based group. Happily YOU told me they cover the Dayton area, so I wrote that in the descriptor. The word "Dayton" only appears on their Web page way at the bottom. What they want is for someone, say a VRM who just took a job in Dayton, to be able to Google "volunteer administrators association in Dayton, OH" and be sure to come up first! (Full disclosure, my DOVIA here in greater Philadelphia is the "Delaware Valley Association of Volunteer Administrators" -- so are we in Delaware? No. And which counties around Philadelphia do we cover? Hmmm.... And the answers are not to be found on the DVAVA Web site either! Guess who I'll be e-mailing next?)

Submitted on April 30th, 2015

Gerald (Jerry) ..., workshop facilitator, consultant, N/A, New York, USA

Yes, it is important to have a website presence. Thanks for the tips - outline, info about free platforms, etc. - makes it less intimidating. I acknowledge the "fear of technology" that some folk may have. What I've observed since 1993 is the constant change in professional association leadership/boards. This can result in a constant learning curve. Leading to too much time focused on re-inventing the wheel vs. time invested in nurturing, mentoring, and orienting new leadership. Such an approach might address the "burn-out" of those who fear leaving because there is no one willing to step-up. We might consider recruiting and nurturing new leadership folk to develop and maintain a professional association's website. Then again, at 66 I can say this, even an old horse can learn technical skills. I think the importance of professional association has been undervalued by the ability to "click and get an answer" (not necessarily a bad thing) and the ongoing pattern of "this job is just a step to the next one" (lack of commitment to the profession of VRM - I've never judged those who make that choice). Again thank you and Jayne C. for pointing out easy to implement solutions!

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025