Evolution of a website – Part 1 of 4

Ever wonder how a website changes over time? Let's take a peek at a website that has been around for years and I share with you four versions of the STC New Mexico Kachina Chapter website. I will also go into the technical details regarding how I implemented the current site.

Before I begin, I wish to thank the previous webmasters for spending countless hours maintaining the previous incarnations of the Kachina Chapter site. Without their effort, the site would not be where it is today without the valuable content that members have contributed.

My discussion will entail how I reached to the website that is today, http://stc-nm-kachina.org. This includes site implementation, page and layout design, website architecture, and content management.

This is a four-part series which I discuss the first two versions of the website pre-WordPress, the third and fourth versions of the site using WordPress, implementation of the fourth version using WordPress and its intricacies, and lastly how to keep the site alive.

Part 1

Versions 1 and 2: pre-WordPress

The history of the site was pretty straightforward until I became webmaster for the Kachina Chapter–previous webmasters either hard-coded from scratch or used a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) HTML editor to design and maintain the website. When I arrived as webmaster, the website was bifurcated into two sites: a static HTML website for Chapter content and a blog powered by WordPress–a simple and powerful content management system for blogging and websites. It didn't help that neither site had the same page and layout design or that some of the static HTML pages linked to much older pages which had a completely different design. Also to note, the blog was not set up correctly for blog posts and it was in a random directory that made it difficult to operate properly.
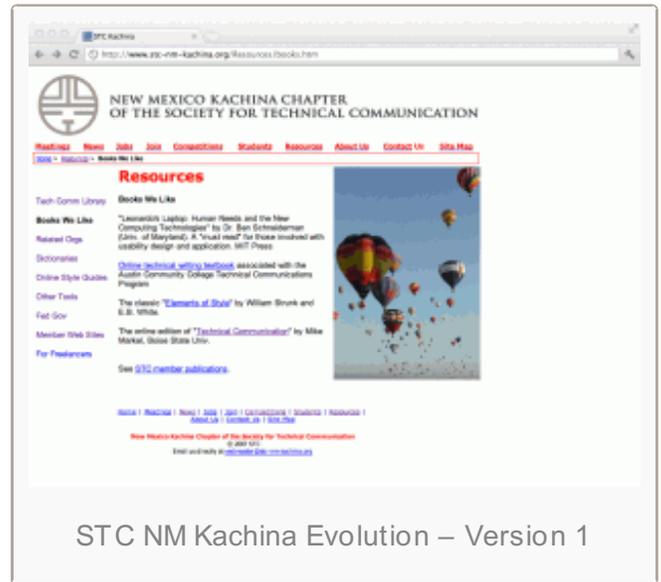
Imagine having the WordPress blog at http://stc-nm-kachina.org/main/ and the HTML static website at http://stc-nm-kachina.org. It just looks messy and confusing for visitors. Which site or blog would visitors go to?

The first two incarnations of the website utilized static HTML and some CSS. These pages are great if the webmaster doesn't drastically change the style or design too much. What I like about the old site is that much of the content and color schemes is now used on the current site.
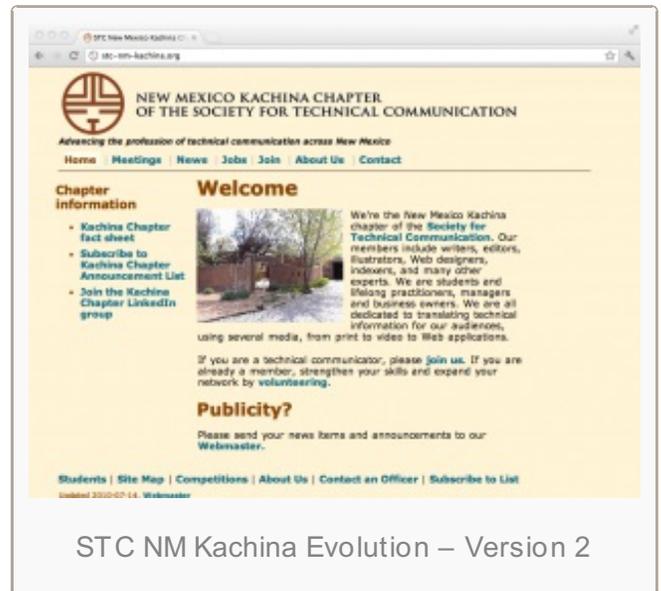
The first version and second version use the same

logo and header, yet the color and layout change dramatically. Since I enjoy the second version color scheme, you see this convention used in future versions.

In two weeks, on July 24, 2012 at 11:05 a.m. ET, I will discuss part two of my four-part series. Part two will encompass how I used WordPress to design and support the site.

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Version 1

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Version 2

Evolution of a website – Part 2 of 4

Part 2

Version 3: my first WordPress layout

Because I was a new Chapter Council member as Secretary and then Webmaster, I avoided dramatically changing the website. I left the static HTML pages alone and implemented my own WordPress design for the blog and website. It was a start, but not what expected.

I also identified three reasons why we needed to move completely to WordPress for powering our website:

- cleaner layout design

- consistent navigation

- easier to update

The site I designed used custom PHP, HTML, and CSS. It was great for providing the content we needed in one location, but it didn't have the features or design I truly envisioned. The second issue I had was that the WordPress site was still in the same directory as before (http://stc-nm-kachina.org/main) and it did not replace the static HTML website. My next step was to use what I have learned so far and customize an already-made and free WordPress theme for the Kachina Chapter website.

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Version 3

Version 4: current design, pretty and professional

What I needed was a solution to merge all static HTML pages and all blog posts under one roof and one design.

My criteria for implementing WordPress for all
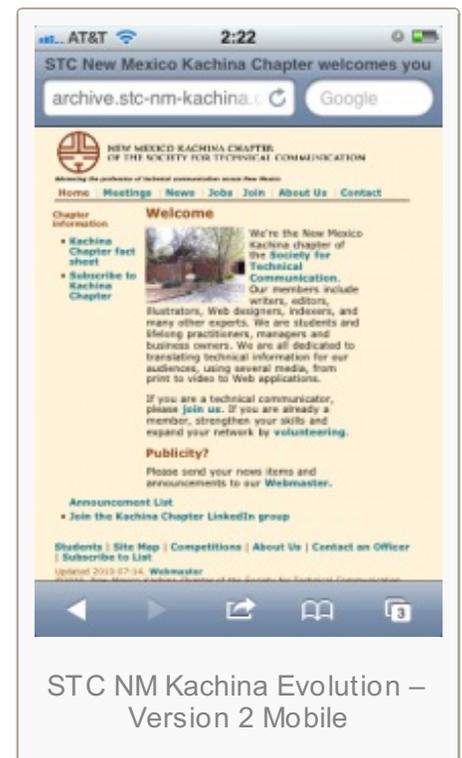
chapter pages was that it had to be

- simple for users to contribute and collaborate,

- easy to integrate with social media sites,

- accessible for a wide variety of audiences and devices,

- powerful for utilizing search engine optimizations,

- and flexible enough to change layout designs and website architecture.

WordPress appeared to satisfy my criterion for the STC New Mexico Kachina Chapter website. I wanted a truly functional and professional looking site that was dynamic and best represented the field of technical communication. The content management system has many features which make it an advanced website for a local STC chapter. Did you know: there is a mobile version or it uses advanced SEO techniques, and offers XML and RSS feeds? You know now.
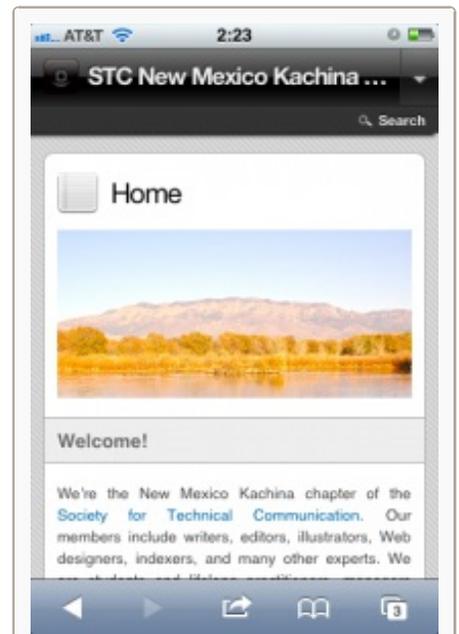
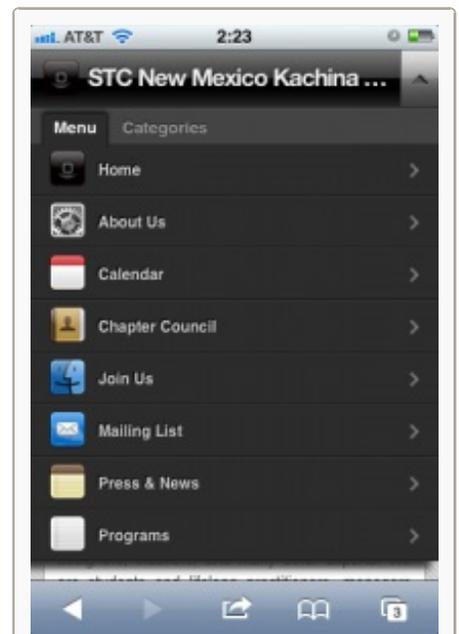The old static HTML site did not have those features.

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Version 4

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Version 2 Mobile

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Mobile Version

STC NM Kachina Evolution – Mobile Navigation

Evolution of a website – Part 3 of 4

Note: this is a four-part series which I discuss the first two versions of the website pre-WordPress, the third and fourth versions of the site using WordPress, implementation of the fourth version using WordPress and its intricacies, and lastly how to keep the site alive.

Part 3

Implementation

Before I made the switch to utilize WordPress fully, I did some housekeeping before moving everything over. The hosting services at the time were okay for our needs, but we needed much more control over our webspace, email systems, and mailing list–something our previous hosting company could not provide without our chapter feeding them more money (I won't even get into details how much money we were being ripped off, I peg the figure at being overcharged about 200%). Before moving the STC Kachina website over, I had to package up the site and mySQL database, upload all site files in their place, and modify DNS settings to point to the new hosting company.

Packing the fine China–in this case our website

I made sure everything was in place when we made the move so nothing would break and everything would continue operating as if we flipped a switch and the lights stayed on. As a professional chapter, we could not afford downtime in any form of interrupted services. Before making the website design change, I tested custom site designs and layouts on a test server before implementing it our final product. I also set up our email system and downloaded all the email we had from our previous hosting company. Once it was complete, I could cut the links from our old hosting company and send out a final message summarizing the new changes to the mailing list.

Moving the house does break things–even when done carefully

Among the changes we had, such as site organization, I used HTTP 301 Redirects. The current convention for websites is to use simple easy to read URLs. These links consist of lowercase characters, dashes instead of spaces, and human readable text.

For example: http://www.stc-nm-kachina.org/ContactUs.html directed visitors to the Chapter Council contact page, but http://stc-nm-kachina.org/chapter-council is a more appropriate and better URL.

The issue I saw by changing the naming convention and organization of web pages is encountering HTTP 404 Page Not Found errors or countless broken links. What I did was implement 301 Redirects to dictate to the server that if anyone goes to "ContactUs.html" to permanently redirect the user to "chapter-council". 301 Redirects is a nifty way to fix potential problems until most visitors get accustomed to the new site. There are about thirty redirects which point users to the right pages.

Request		Destination
example: /about.htm		example: http://stc-nm-kachina.org/about/
/Jobs.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/jobs/
/ContactUs.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/chapter-council/
/AboutUs.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/about/
/Join.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/join/
/Students/index.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/students/
/Resources/index.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/
/main/meetings/	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/category/meetings/
/Contact_Us/officers.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/chapter-council/
/main/category/meetings	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/category/meetings/
/main/	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org
/Resources/books.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/books/
/Resources/dictionaries.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/reference/
/Students/nmsu.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/students/nmsu/
/Students/tvi.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/students/cnm/
/Students/unm.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/students/unm/
/Students/highlands.htm	=	http://stc-nm-kachina.org/resources/students/nmhu/

STC NM Kachina – 301 Redirects

Evolution of a website – Part 4 of 4

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Part 4

Maintaining the site and keeping content fresh

While we moved houses and unpacked, the tricky part was to keep the content relevant and fresh. The problem with static websites and why they suffer is because content updated infrequently. It can be a time-consuming task being webmaster, but with WordPress, the task of updating the site can be delegated to a team. Instead of having a webmaster as a bottleneck for updating information, contributors can use the self-service interface and update the website themselves.

I love being a webmaster of website that will take little effort to update or add content. WordPress offers that convenience for a small price: the time to learn and familiarize oneself with the software and associated plug-ins.

I am truly satisfied how the final product came out. While the website is one step closer to having a fully functional chapter, it is definitely a start to communicate with members and represent the community. Many thanks go out to the previous webmasters who contributed their efforts on the website. I also want to thank my colleagues who helped with site content with their suggestions and advice–without their availability, this site would be stuck in a black hole.

Is the Future in Social Media?

The next step in moving forward is to promote the Kachina Chapter through our social media channels. What is great about the latest design is that there are social media links at the top of the website which direct visitors and members to view our site on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. I hope that we can use these tools to communicate with current members and recruit new individuals who may be interested in the field of technical communication. So far, this is only the beginning!

Conclusion

Websites take some interesting paths to get to where they are now. In this case, I believe the STC New Mexico Kachina website is at its best since it was originally created. While I understand that different technologies are working together to display the site in its current state, to most people this implementation may seem complicated on the back-end, but it was meant to make updates easier and have greater accessibility on the internet. The point I want to make is, while the current site took a tremendous amount of effort to implement, it is the best version that utilizes previous design cues, color schemes, and content. Now it should be easier to maintain and faster to update and change without having to use a WYSIWYG editor. All that future web masters can do is log into a web interface and update the site with ease.