

Once you've laid the groundwork for your site, it's time to implement your ideas. Building your project one component at a time reduces risk and raises confidence. Results can be seen and evaluated more rapidly, and lessons from one phase can be applied to the next. Try to stay flexible and experiment with new methods for implementing subsequent phases.

To outsource or not to outsource

There are two ways to get your information on the Internet: load the site on a municipal computer and acquire a connection to the Internet, or contract with an outside organization to host your site and make it available to the public.

One large town already had a server and hosts its site in-house. Another city started with an ISP but plans to bring the site to its own server within the next year or two. The rest of the participants use an ISP to host their site. Each is appropriate in different situations and has its own costs and benefits.

Register your domain name

Before your site goes live, it needs a domain name—an Internet address or URL. It is important to choose a domain name that is easy to remember. The conventional naming system for counties in New York State looks like this: www.co.rockland.ny.us. For cities, it looks like this www.ci.ithaca.ny.us/. For towns, it looks like this www.town.clarkstown.ny.us/. For villages, it looks like this www.village.briarcliff-manor.ny.us.

Several of the participants said their county or municipality registered a dot com, dot org, or dot net address, like www.colonie.org. Some registered more than one address to ensure citizens could access the site in more than one way. For example, Rockland County uses both www.rocklandgov.com and www.co.rockland.ny.us as URL addresses that reach its home page.

How to register

There are several organizations that can register your domain name. Choose the one that makes the most sense to your county or municipality.

The US Department of Commerce owns a Web Site—www.interNIC.net—that provides a great deal of information about how to register a domain name. It covers such issues as choosing a registrar, the registration process, and the cost of registration.

Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

The ISP market is changing quickly, with new providers appearing and companies consolidating fairly often. It's important to evaluate your options carefully and consider your long-term needs.

An ISP provides Internet access and may be a public agency, such as New York State's Office of General Services, or a private company, like Net Heaven, America Online, or many other local or national companies. ISPs offer a variety of services, from simple dial-up Internet connections to full Web site development. These are common ISP services:

Internet connection. The ISP provides a network connection to the Internet. Issues such as speed and availability of the connection are important considerations. They affect the time users must spend to access and use your site.

Web site hosting. An ISP provides server space and network connections which you can rent to house your site and enable it to be accessed by your citizens. In this arrangement, your government would keep the design, content, and maintenance responsibilities of your site in-house.

Web page development. Many ISPs provide Web site development services. These may range from simply converting documents into HTML to designing your overall site. Some ISPs can create content, implement your site, and conduct marketing activities.

Web servers and other services. An ISP may be able to provide services such as a Web server, e-mail, and discussion groups. Customized applications, like database access and search engines, are often unavailable

through ISPs and require in-house hosting of the service.

Test your Web service

Before making your site available to the public, it's important to test it thoroughly. The site should be tested by project members first, then by a larger audience within your municipality, and finally the public. Develop a formal plan to test the site's structure, content, presentation, and interface, and incorporate the test results before launching the site.

Generally, you test to find out if your site is organized and user-friendly. Some specific things to test for are: graphics appearing in the right places, correct and logical links, useful introductory information for content, reasonable response times for downloading graphics, adequate connection times, and operational security features. Testing isn't just a pre-launch activity. Updates and new pages need to be tested before being added to your site. You should also periodically check the links.

Get a little help from your friends

Tell others about your site, invite them to visit, and ask for honest opinions and feedback.

Market your service to the outside world

The government representatives we worked with said there are a number of conventional ways to get your site some recognition in the community, including:

- Sending press releases to the local media
- Having the county executive, mayor, or town supervisor make public speeches
- Delivering presentations to local associations and organizations
- Placing stories in local newspapers
- Posting the address on all government documents, particularly tourism brochures and official letterhead
- Putting the Web address on government vehicles

Tips from colleagues

- "Know what to look for in an ISP including security, access, and speed."
- "Get a meaningful domain name that identifies your municipality with brand name recognition."
- "Run your site in search engines so people can find it easily."

Rockland County has an in-house Web master and outsourced its Web hosting services for \$100 a month, rather than spending \$30,000 to buy a server and invest in the technical staff expertise it would take to maintain it.

Get other services and directories to point to you

The Web also provides several mechanisms for getting your site "on the map." Ask an all-inclusive search listing service, such as the one provided by Yahoo, to add links to your site. Contact other services to find out what portions of your site are regularly scanned so you can put the right words in your content.

Directory services like Yahoo need human intervention to get your Web site listed in the proper categories. You can assist the positive positioning of your Web site by supplying keywords in the meta tags, using descriptive titles within the title tag, and ensuring that the first 66 lines of your online documents contain as much information about your site as possible.