

Creating Better Philatelic Websites

A Recipe for Success through the APS Star Route Website Competition

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for the Rochester Philatelic Association



I had the privilege to be one of five judges for the 2023 American Philatelic Society Star Route Website Competition, an annual contest that critiques philatelic websites made by stamp club chapters and affiliate organizations associated with the APS.

The judging panel included a diverse group of APS members with experience in creating websites, publishing and social media representing collectors young and older alike.

Creating a website is much like cooking. It starts by selecting good ingredients, then preparing and combining them into a hearty meal for everyone. Diners are looking for food that's both eye-appealing and satisfying. So are website viewers!

This brief presentation summarizes our findings to allow all to share in best practices used by fellow webmasters. The goal of the competition is to help improve both content and web design across the board, present the best that our hobby has to offer to a worldwide audience and reward those whose work we see.



Food for thought...

Why does any group have (or want) a website to begin with? Here are three reasons:

1. Promotion of the organization' collecting interests and specialties.
2. Gain new members.
3. Keep current members informed about programs and services offered.

Why is someone visiting the website?

1. The person already has an interest in philately and is seeing what your group has to offer.
2. The person is already a member and looking for an update about a program or service.
3. The person has no knowledge of philately and is seeking for information about something owned.

Matching the interests of the viewer with content as easily as possible is the key.



Scoring for the competition was done on a point basis covering a wide variety of line items broken down in two main categories, Content and Design, with a few additional points awarded as a bonus. Review “Content” items here to the right. Both categories were broken down into sub-categories in blue, each with various line items in blue, each with various line items.

Judges reviewed all 34 website entries on their own, rating each line item from 1 (non-existent or needs improvement) to 5 (excellent). Those were added up and pro-rated against the maximum points in the sub-category. For example: If the rating sum of all 6 line items in the Quality of Content sub-category was 15 out of the maximum of 30, 50% of the 15 maximum rating would result in a score of 7.5 points. It’s not as complicated as it seems!

CONTENT ELEMENTS TOTAL	
CONTENT (max 45 points)	Essential Information (0-20 points)
	Informative main page
	Prominent name/logo
	Purpose/goals/objective
	Meeting information
	Contact information
	News/research/exhibits
	Social media
	Quality of Content (0-15 points)
	Original work regularly posted
	Engaging
	Accurate
	Current
	Applicable to stated goals
	Grammar/spelling
Membership (0-10 points)	
Membership application	
Member services/benefits	
Constitution/bylaws	
Current membership total	
Recognition of members	

Sub-categories

Line items



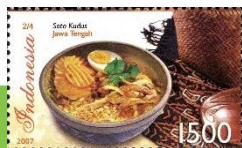
Here are the competition's "Design Elements" sub-categories and line items to the right, along with Bonus section below.

The scoring sub-categories and line items continue to change from year to year to better reflect the evolution of web technology and website content.

Take a closer look at these on the upcoming slides.

BONUS POINTS TOTAL	
	Easy to remember URL
	Top search ranking
	Unobtrusive/useful ads
	Virtual exhibits
	Chatrooms/forums
	Ecommerce/electronic dues payment
	Reason to return
	Other (explain in Notes)

DESIGN ELEMENTS TOTAL	
DESIGN (max. 55 points)	Structure and Navigation (0-15 Points)
	Ease of navigation
	Intuitive flow
	Consistent structure
	Effectively sectioned
	Search/site map
	Meaningful page titles
	Visual Design (0-15 Points)
	Cohesive visual theme
	Consistent page design
	Use of space
	Effective photos/images
	Video content
	Functionality (0-15 Points)
	Images load
Links function	
Multi-browser compatibility	
Mobile optimization	
Communication (0-10 Points)	
Feedback solicited (email, web form, guest book, etc.)	
Social Media Links	
Promotion of club events/local philatelic events	



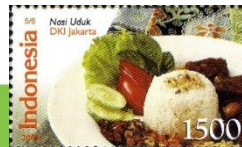
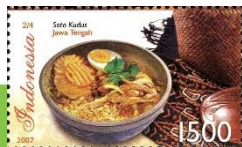
CONTENT ELEMENTS – Essential Information

These line items cover the most important info for viewers. The best websites briefly answer these questions up front:

1. What does the club specialize in or collect?
2. How long has the club been around and how many current members are there?
3. If local, where, when and how frequently does the club meet?
4. What are the benefits of membership and how can I join?
5. Where is the organization located?
6. Who can I contact if I have a question?

Linked pages can give further details about these as well as provide additional content, like news, upcoming events, exhibits and presentations. Social media links show viewers this group uses the latest communication tools!

CONTENT ELEMENTS TOTAL	
CONTENT (max. 45 points)	Essential Information (0-20 points)
	Informative main page
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	Purpose/goals/objective
	Meeting information
	Contact information
	News/research/exhibits
	Social media
	Quality of Content (0-15 points)
	Original work regularly posted
	Engaging
	Accurate
	Current
	Applicable to stated goals
	Grammar/spelling
Membership (0-10 points)	
Membership application	
Member services/benefits	
Constitution/bylaws	
Current membership total	
Recognition of members	



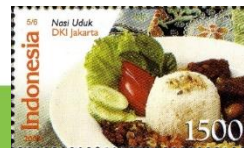
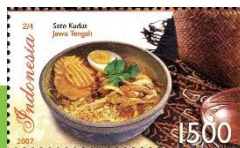
CONTENT ELEMENTS – Quality of Content

Websites get “stale” quickly or just “rot” if the content is rarely changed. A guarantee of “freshness” is easy by adding “Last Updated...” on the home page or placing dates elsewhere on meaningful content, like newsletters, photos, calendar of events, etc.

No one likes to see typos or read poorly written text. Having someone else review content before posting online, or immediately after posting, can quickly catch these glitches.

An engaging web site is one that gives viewers a sense of craving more! This is totally subjective, but original and unique content raises a site’s “it’s got it” factor.

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Member services/benefits	
Constitution/bylaws	
Current membership total	
Recognition of members	



CONTENT ELEMENTS – Membership

A website should be a group's primary recruitment tool with the general public. Give prospects what they want!

Almost all organizations have bylaws or rules of how the club manages itself. Posting these imply stability and order.

Viewers should know how many members there are now. Finding member references in words and pictures throughout the site displays a sense of family and comradery.

A downloadable PDF or online application is a must along with instructions on how dues are to be collected.

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Membership (0-10 points)	
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Member services/benefits	
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DESIGN ELEMENTS – Structure and Navigation

Design covers a broad spectrum when it comes to web sites, but is broken down into four sub-categories for simplicity.

Structure and navigation is rather self-explanatory. It should be easy to maneuver from page to page throughout the site no matter the start or end point.

Like chapters in a book, a website is best divided into easy to understand sections with appropriately titled sub-pages.

Lastly, inclusion of a search engine or site map will help visitors find what they need quickly.

DESIGN ELEMENTS TOTAL	
DESIGN (max. 55 points)	→ Structure and Navigation (0-15 Points)
	Ease of navigation
	Intuitive flow
	Consistent structure
	Effectively sectioned
	Search/site map
	Meaningful page titles
	Visual Design (0-15 Points)
	Cohesive visual theme
	Consistent page design
	Use of space
	Effective photos/images
	Video content
	Functionality (0-15 Points)
	Images load
Links function	
Multi-browser compatibility	
Mobile optimization	
Communication (0-10 Points)	
Feedback solicited (email, web form, guest book, etc.)	
Social Media Links	
Promotion of club events/local philatelic events	



DESIGN ELEMENTS – Visual Design

Eye appeal is important in grabbing the attention of viewers.

Use of color, images and backgrounds uniformly among the pages is important. They should compliment one another.

Cluttered pages with too much in text and/or images are to be avoided. Having too little on a page is equally a turn-off.

Posting relevant videos (created by the organization or originating on other sites) can add interest and “longer eyeballs” on a site.

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	Effective photos/images
	Video content
	Functionality (0-15 Points)
	Images load
Links function	
Multi-browser compatibility	
Mobile optimization	
Communication (0-10 Points)	
Feedback solicited (email, web form, guest book, etc.)	
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DESIGN ELEMENTS – Functionality

Everyone expects a website to work properly. All images should appear as expected and in a timely fashion. Clickable links also should take you to the correct and functioning web page.

Viewing the same website using different browsers on the same screen can bring about slight differences in appearance, but should not be disruptive to viewers.

Websites can look different on a computer screen versus a tablet or cell phone. Newer HTML computer code can detect the viewing screen size and adjust the layout to optimize its appearance, with varying levels of success. Sites written in older code display without this customization feature.



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	Functionality (0-15 Points)
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Links function	
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Mobile optimization	
Communication (0-10 Points)	
Feedback solicited (email, web form, guest book, etc.)	
Social Media Links	
Promotion of club events/local philatelic events	

DESIGN ELEMENTS – Communication

Every opportunity to encourage web-based communications, whether it be member-to-member or with the general public in some way, can only bring about positive results.

Guest books used to be a “must-have” on websites. While they are still available to gain feedback, more responsive social media technologies have overshadowed their use. Even so, email remains the easiest and most prolific tool used today. Email contacts should be easily found.

Groups that do not actively promote meetings, activities and events on their sites are really missing out!

DESIGN ELEMENTS TOTAL	
DESIGN (max. 55 points)	Structure and Navigation (0-15 Points)
	Ease of navigation
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	Consistent structure
	Effectively sectioned
	Search/site map
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	Visual Design (0-15 Points)
	Cohesive visual theme
	Consistent page design
	Use of space
	Effective photos/images
	Video content
	Functionality (0-15 Points)
	Images load
Links function	
Multi-browser compatibility	
Mobile optimization	
Communication (0-10 Points)	
Feedback solicited (email, web form, guest book, etc.)	
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BONUS POINTS – Miscellaneous Line Items

This section is a catch-all for a variety of line items that don't fall into the Content or Design categories, or are not necessarily vital or apply to every philatelic organization, but enhance a user's experience.

Short and relatable URLs (web addresses) are best.

Several factors affect algorithms that put a web site at the top of a search engine's results. Some can be influenced by the site's coding, others by displayed and hidden key words.

Paid ads from dealers and others can help defray website management costs and help members obtain material.

	BONUS POINTS TOTAL (enter X if applicable)
BONUS PTS (max. 4.5 pts)	Easy to remember URL
	Top search ranking
	Unobtrusive/useful ads
	Virtual exhibits
	Chatrooms/forums
	Ecommerce/electronic dues payment
	Reason to return
	Other (explain in Notes)



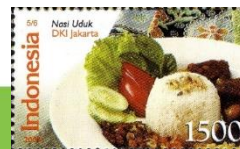
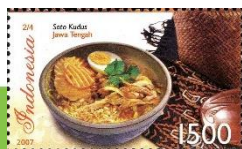
So now let's mix these "ingredients" and really cook! Here are my ratings of a contestant's website that came very close to the overall five judge average. Remember, line item ratings are from 1 (not present or needs improvement) highlighted in red to 5 (excellent) in green. My resulting score total was 68.6 points versus the consensus average score of 70.

CONTENT ELEMENTS TOTAL		28.3
Essential Information (0-20 points)		10.9
Informative main page	3	
Prominent name/logo	5	
Purpose/goals/objective	5	
Meeting information	1	
Contact information	3	
News/research/exhibits	1	
Social media	1	
Quality of Content (0-15 points)		13
Original work regularly posted	3	
Engaging	3	
Accurate	5	
Current	5	
Applicable to stated goals	5	
Grammar/spelling	5	
Membership (0-10 points)		4.4
Membership application	5	
Member services/benefits	3	
Constitution/bylaws	1	
Current membership total	1	
Recognition of members	1	

DESIGN ELEMENTS TOTAL		39.3
Structure and Navigation (0-15 Points)		12
Ease of navigation	5	
Intuitive flow	5	
Consistent structure	5	
Effectively sectioned	3	
Search/site map	1	
Meaningful page titles	5	
Visual Design (0-15 Points)		9
Cohesive visual theme	5	
Consistent page design	3	
Use of space	3	
Effective photos/images	3	
Video content	1	
Functionality (0-15 Points)		15
Images load	5	
Links function	5	
Multi-browser compatibility	5	
Mobile optimization	5	

BONUS POINTS TOTAL (enter X if applicable)		1
Easy to remember URL	X	
Top search ranking	X	
Unobtrusive/useful ads		
Virtual exhibits		
Chatrooms/forums		
Ecommerce/electronic dues payment		
Reason to return		
Other (explain in Notes)		

Consensus Medal Award	Vermeil
Consensus Total Score	70
JUDGE MEDAL AWARD	Vermeil
JUDGE TOTAL SCORE	68.6
CONTENT ELEMENTS (up to 45 pts)	28.3
DESIGN ELEMENTS (up to 55 pts)	39.3
BONUS POINTS (up to 4.5 pts)	1



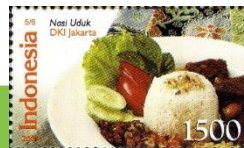
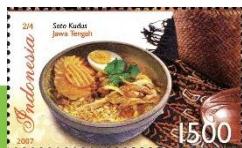
Each total score equates to an award medal level as follows: Silver <54 pts, Large Silver 55-64 pts, Vermeil 65-74 pts, Large Vermeil 75-84 pts, Gold 85-89 pts, Large Gold 90+ pts.

Consensus Medal Award	Vermeil
Consensus Total Score	70
JUDGE MEDAL AWARD	Vermeil
JUDGE TOTAL SCORE	68.6
CONTENT ELEMENTS (up to 45 pts)	28.3
DESIGN ELEMENTS (up to 55 pts)	39.3
BONUS POINTS (up to 4.5 pts)	1

Feedback from all five judges for this entry is here:

Comments

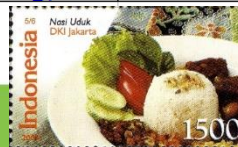
Difficult to find the join button, must go to the contact us section. Quite difficult to navigate. It would be great to be able to pay online.	No events or news tab. No links to social media. However, the group objective is clear. The website colours are inviting, but there could be more information.
see below	Seems to be a nice start to the study group's web presence and some categories probably don't apply, such as meeting information; and, much of the meaty content is likely within the group's bulletin. Perhaps consider the following: One feature article appears on website, perhaps add a second, shorter, item. Perhaps add a News area, where new stamps of this topic can be shown. Add an area where members can be recognized for any exhibit or literature awards and accomplishments. Is there ever a meeting of the group at a major show? Please note such. Perhaps a spot for president's (or other officer's) message. Are there any appropriate videos that can be linked?
If available, add links to video presentations.	Add a blog and start a Facebook page.
Consider separating the list of email contacts from the membership information, placing each on their own page. Do you plan to offer all back issues of the newsletter on the site? Explaining more about your group—how many members are there? In what states/countries do they live, how was your organization formed, give some examples of the people/works people collect.	The Links bar does not show up on the "Featured Article" page. Do place stamps on each page in some way to add more color on each. 1. Ensure the main navigation menu is available from every page. At the time of writing, it is not present when viewing the Featured Article page. 2. Better optimize the site for mobile devices. Currently, when viewing the site from a mobile device, there are some whitespace, text alignment, and content overlap issues in some areas of the site.
One suggestion relating to the site content would be to publish the club's constitution/bylaws for easy access by current and prospective members.	



Here are the 2023 APS Star Route Website Contestants and results. Congratulations, all!

Club/Affiliate Name	Website URL	Consensus Pts	Consensus Medal
American Society for Netherlands Philately	www.asnp1975.com	63.44	Large Silver
Bermuda Collectors Society	https://bermudacollectorsociety.com/	85.44	Gold
Big Lick Stamp Club	http://www.biglickstampclub.org/	74.11	Vermeil
Calgary Philatelic Society	http://www.calgaryphilatelicsociety.com/	76.56	Large Vermeil
Cresthaven Stamp Club	https://cresthavenstampclub/	68.11	Vermeil
Dallas-Park-Cities Philatelic Society	http://dallasstamps.org/	80.89	Large Vermeil
Disneyana on Stamps Society	https://disnemation.wixsite.com/doss	69	Vermeil
Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections (ESPER)	www.esperstamps.org	85.78	Gold
Eire Philatelic Society	www.eirephilatelicassoc.org	86.89	Gold
Empire State Postal History Society, American Philatelic Society	https://www.esphs.org/	83.19	Large Vermeil
Greater Boston Philatelic Society	https://theqbps.com/	79.67	Large Vermeil
Greater Mound City Stamp Club	www.greatermoundcity.org	90.56	Large Gold
Greater Philadelphia Stamp and Collectors Club	https://www.gpscc.org/	73.22	Vermeil
International Society of Guatemala Collectors	https://www.guatemalastamps.com/	77.36	Large Vermeil
Journalists, Authors, and Poets on Stamps	www.authorsonstamps.org	70	Vermeil
Knoxville Philatelic Society	www.knoxstamps.com	86.33	Gold
Midwest Stamp Dealers Association - MSDA	www.msdestamp.com	72.78	Vermeil
National Duck Stamp Collectors Society	http://www.ndscs.org/	64.03	Large Silver
Nevada Stamp Study Society	https://RenoStamp.org	88.78	Gold
North Toronto Stamp Club	https://www.northtorontostampclub.ca/home	83	Large Vermeil
Norwalk Stamp Club	https://norwalkstampclub.com/	80	Large Vermeil
Omaha Philatelic Society	https://omahaphilatelicssociety.org	83.33	Large Vermeil
Philatelic Society of Lancaster County	https://www.lcps-stamps.org/	91.33	Large Gold
Poway Stamp Club	https://powaystampclub.com/	86.89	Gold
Society for Czechoslovak Philately, Inc.	www.csphilately.net	86.56	Gold
Springfield Stamp Club	https://www.springfieldstampclub.org/	87	Gold
The International Society of World Wide Stamp Collectors	https://www.iswsc.org/	74.11	Vermeil
The Stamp Forum	https://thestampforum.boards.net/	67.11	Vermeil
Third Reich Study Group	www.trsq-usa.com	59.44	Large Silver
U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, APS Chapter	https://www.uspcs.org/	90	Large Gold
United Postal Stationery Society	www.upss.org	78.44	Large Vermeil
Vatican Philatelic Society	www.vaticanstamps.org	76.67	Large Vermeil
Wilkinsburg Stamp Club	wilkinsburgstampclub.com	71.67	Vermeil
Wyoming Valley Stamp Club	https://invite.bubluup.com/mU88w1YR_gDO	69.22	Vermeil

Consensus Medal Count		
0-54	Silver	0
55-64	Large Silver	3
65-74	Vermeil	10
75-84	Large Vermeil	10
85-89	Gold	8
90+	Large Gold	3



Doggie Bag Take-Aways...

As is customary, the five judges were invited by APS contest coordinator Nora Bryson at the contest's conclusion to discuss the overall process and results. All agreed it was a worthwhile experience, although time consuming with 34 entries.

It is clear that philatelic groups with a member having website expertise, or resources to hire someone to construct and post updates, have a leg-up. But it is getting easier for non-techie types to make impressive websites by using online creation applications, some of which are free.

An interesting discussion took place about whether content or design was more important. The younger judges' comments were design-centric, especially when it comes to the importance of having a mobile-friendly site, while those judges with a bit of grey favored content. In the end, finding a balance is the right solution.



A home page should be kept uncluttered and informative. One that is engaging and colorful welcomes the viewer to explore more of the site. Logos, photos and images are great, but the introductory text is equally importance. It should not overwhelm, but briefly address most of the “Essential Information” line items mentioned earlier.

How can any philatelic web site not display some kind of philatelic item or element on their home page? Images relevant to a club or collecting specialty trump others.

Is a copyright symbol and year necessary? Some sites display a copyright (©) symbol along with a year at the bottom of their home page and subsequent pages. In fact, it’s not needed if the web site contains original content, which is automatically protected. Listing only one year either represents the year the site went live or that of its latest update.



Quick tips for a better web site (not in any particular order)

Content

- Having presentations and exhibits adds to viewer interest
- Always post a PDF membership application and/or link to an online membership form
- Having an online payment system for dues or merchandise is a convenient feature
- Link to a calendar of upcoming events—meetings, stamp shows and such
- Post officer names, titles and give their contact details
- A sample newsletter to download is a plus, preferably one from the past 6-12 months
- Describe what's behind a Members Only area for those who cannot access it
- Adding or linking to informative videos will gain greater interest of the viewer



Quick tips continued...

Content

- Check all links regularly to make sure they work- use an online tool like www.brokenlinkcheck.com or an older application called Xenu <http://home.snafu.de/tilman/xenulink.html> to validate they function
- A search feature allows visitors to quickly find what they need - check out <https://www.freefind.com/> or another free application like it
- Use interactive Google or similar maps to pinpoint locations that allow viewers to customize information they need
- Offering members of the public a free evaluation (*not formal appraisal*) service for philatelic items before in-person meetings will draw their community's attention to the club and bring in material possibly for sale



Quick tips continued...

Design

- Use home page images relevant to the club or collecting specialty
- Use high quality and high resolution images
- Font sizes should be uniform and large enough for the average (and older) viewer
- Every web page should display a consistent navigation menu
- If social media [Facebook, Twitter (X), etc.] or a blog is used, make sure the content is updated regularly

It's now up to you!



To paraphrase a popular jingle...

Better Ingredients...

Better Websites...

APS!

