

Home sweet homepage

The importance of an up to date and easy to find website should not be underestimated by scientists looking to establish links to others in their community — and represents good value for relatively little effort.

Scientists are busy people. Science does not typically follow a 9 to 5 schedule and there is always something else to do, which means that some seemingly minor 'housekeeping' projects get put on the back burner — and stay there. And on any given day, it is unlikely that the item at the top of a researcher's to-do list is 'update website'. Nevertheless, the importance of an effective homepage for either an individual researcher or an entire research group should not be underestimated.

Scientists traditionally communicate their research findings to the wider community in one of two ways. Results are typically shared in talks — whether departmental seminars or conference presentations — and, somewhat more formally, through papers published in scientific journals (or deposited in repository websites such as arXiv.org or *Nature Precedings*). Of course, any single talk or article usually provides just a snapshot of one aspect of an individual's body of work. And although research papers are catalogued in searchable databases (such as PubMed, Web of Knowledge and Scopus, to name but a few) — which enable a particular scientist's publication record to be displayed at the click of a few buttons — this is done with little context.

In contrast, a well-constructed personal website provides a researcher the opportunity to go further than merely indexing their presentations and publications. It gives them a customizable platform on which useful background information about their research can be presented to a more general audience — as well as offering specifics and technical detail that may be of interest to fellow specialists. Such sites can also be used to compile group-related information, as well as links to other internet resources that are relevant to the group's activities, including to the pages of their collaborators. And of course, a personal website can also be used for promotional purposes by highlighting notable achievements, awards and press coverage. Finally, research-group pages also allow the personality of the group to shine through — with news, photos and other group lore or trivia — reminding us that, for the most part, chemists are human after all!

An effective online presence can make a research group (its leader, its members

and its work) much more visible to their wider community and beyond. Assuming that contact information is readily available on such a website, it also makes scientists much more accessible — at least in principle. Whereas established researchers probably fend off (or ignore) numerous unwanted applications for student fellowships and postdoctoral positions, those starting out on an academic career path may be much more grateful for such enquiries. Similarly, journal editors — including those at *Nature Chemistry* — often peruse chemists' websites to try and track down suitable referees for manuscripts. Although the prospect of reviewing even more papers may tempt some to reduce their online presence, providing an up-to-date research profile could lead to fewer inappropriate refereeing requests. Moreover, we also browse researchers' web pages to seek out potential contributors to our News & Views and In Your Element sections.

When looking for information online, the first port of call for most internet users is a search engine of some kind. This is no different when trying to track down the websites of individual scientists, although there is a set of particularly useful chemistry-related links (such as departments, journals and individuals) hosted by the Goodman group at the University of Cambridge¹. At some institutions, tracking down the web pages for specific departments or researchers can sometimes be a labyrinthine experience (especially when the language of the site is different from that of the person seeking information) and so the easier it is to find a website through a search engine — such as through the use of keywords — the better.

The issue of language can be a very sensitive one and researchers should obviously create their own websites in whichever language they prefer. Nevertheless, because English has, for the most part, been adopted as the common language for scientific discourse, creating an English version of a non-English website will increase the size of its potential audience quite significantly. Even if such an alternative site simply contains basic biographical and contact information, this would help to make a researcher more visible to the international

community. Of course, there are various automatic translation services available on the internet, but the results obtained from them should be treated with some degree of caution. Furthermore, making it known that an alternative language version of a website is available — and making it easy to find — is crucial.

This is not the place to discuss the rules of web design, and there are many different ways of building simple and effective websites. From the perspective of journal editors who spend a significant amount of time browsing chemists' websites from around the world, there are certainly some elements that are particularly useful. Obviously contact details are important, but so are summaries of research interests as well as lists of representative publications. And it may not be for the camera shy, but a photo is also quite useful because then we know who to look for if we arrange a meeting at a conference. Perhaps the most important aspect of any website, however, is how long ago it was last updated. Broken links and outdated information are no good for anyone. Although this may seem obvious to many of our readers, in our experience there are a significant number of chemists who — through their own choice or otherwise — do not have an effective online presence.

Of course, establishing a web presence requires the investment of resources (including time and/or money), but once there, maintenance should be a much less demanding task. If done properly, a website can become — if one wishes it to — an incredibly effective window into a research group. It enables scientists to present their work to a very wide audience and to raise their profile within their community. And this is just the tip of the iceberg; the internet can do so much more for chemists and one example of this can be found at Jean-Claude Bradley's Useful Chemistry site² and associated wiki. Compared with the early days³, the internet now has much more to offer chemists — from personal homepages to open notebook science. □

References

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2. <http://usefulchem.blogspot.com/>
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