



City of San Marcos
Case Study



Revamped Website Reflects Reshaped Community in San Marcos, California

A ten-year population boom and changing demographics in the City of San Marcos, in northern San Diego County, California, led City leaders to refresh their brand to better reflect a reshaped city. By 2015, however, that new brand and identity were sorely missing from the city's aging website.

Outdated design and a decentralized, inconsistent approach to content management had resulted in what San Marcos Communications Officer Sarah Macdonald described as “an information explosion” on the city's website. Some areas were current and others hadn't been touched in years.

“We needed a site redesign not only to refresh our look and feel, but also to get our content back under control,” said Macdonald. “Residents expect the same level of innovation from government websites as our corporate counterparts. Our goal was to make it easy for residents to connect with services and programs, and provide visitors and businesses with an instant impression of what San Marcos is all about. In the end, we reinvented our main navigation, reorganized and reduced more than 10,000 pages of content to 383 pages.”

Why Vision?

After a competitive selection process, which included evaluations of product functionality, sustainability, vendor experience and training expertise, San Marcos chose El Segundo, Calif.-based Vision to develop its new site.

“We needed a user-friendly content management system and Vision's CMS was far more advanced than the other top candidates,” Macdonald said. “Also, the visionLive™

maintenance subscription program was a huge plus, because it ensures that our new site will stay relevant and on the cutting edge.”

Data-Driven Design Strategy

According to Macdonald, Vision brought tremendous value at the very start of the website development process. “Vision's data-driven approach helped us figure out how the site could function better for residents and businesses, and gave us the information we needed for the foundation of our new website. The big advantage of heat mapping and other usability research tools is that they showed us how our old site was working and how people were using it, which informed our design decisions.”

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Sarah MacDonald
Communications Officer
City of San Marcos



San Marcos is a place where people “Live, Work and Play,” which is how the site, www.san-marcos.net is now structured. The new design puts the most popular items right up front, making the site easier than ever to navigate. Advance research showed that people were most interested in: jobs, parks & recreation. They also wanted to “report a concern” online and an adult sports page, which Macdonald said was a surprise finding they would not have known without research. Other new features highly valued by residents are an interactive map directory of the city’s 35 parks, online facility reservations and streamlined department pages with easy-to-find contact information.

New Site Fosters Engagement

The revamped website is the hub of an “ENGAGE San Marcos” communications campaign designed to increase communication and interaction with residents. A “Best of San Marcos” photo contest, started in 2015, produced winning photos that are featured on the city’s new site.

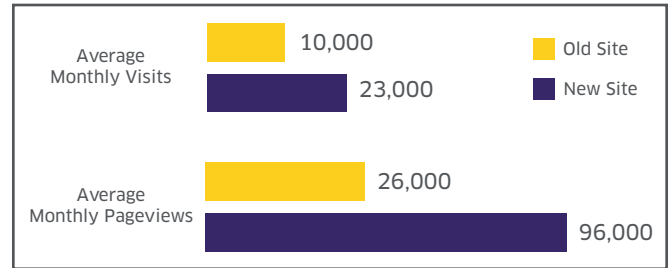
Macdonald said photo contest entries, combined with submissions from local photographers, colleges and shares via the city’s Facebook page, have “created an extensive photo library,” which feeds the dynamic homepage banner with five daytime images that transition to nighttime images when the sun goes down.

One of the most valued features of the new site is its responsive design. San Marcos has an icon-oriented design that displays well on mobile devices. A line of icons in the top right corner of each page allows site visitors to choose a globe icon that can translate website copy into any of more than 100 languages or link to the city’s five social media accounts San Marcos uses to actively engage citizens: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram (the city’s newest social media option designed to connect with a younger demographic).

Monthly Visitors More than Double

According to Macdonald, monthly visits to the new site jumped to 23,000 with 96,000 page views, from an average of 10,000 per month with 26,000 page views on the old site. Online visitors were invited to provide feedback on the new look by completing a short survey.

The survey showed that 90 percent of site visitors (a 22 percent increase) now report the site as easy to navigate. Feedback from internal content managers was even more positive, with all 25 reporting how much easier it is to do back-end work to keep the site current.



The new site also received high praise from City Council. “Our city council members reported that the new site looks great,” Macdonald added. “They said it brings us into the 21st Century.”

Continued Evolution is Key to Long-Term Success

What’s next? San Marcos views its website as a fluid portal. Macdonald said the website content review team will continue to drill down into the site’s content, and already has identified areas for improvement, including plans to increase online service delivery.

San Marcos is also conducting monthly analytic checks to spot changing trends on the top 10 pages viewed. Every three months, Macdonald holds a dedicated “open office hours” session in the computer training room where any of the city’s 25 content managers can walk in to ask questions, work on their updates or discuss specific website topics.

“Keeping the site updated will preserve all the work we just did,” said Macdonald. “As important as planning, advance research and involving City staff early in the process were, accepting that it’s going to be a work in progress is the key to our site’s long-term success.”