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**The City of Cambridge reconstructs its Web site to give greater access to information and services**

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**The problem: Making information and services more accessible**

In the physical world we talk about moving from point A to Point B as “going somewhere,” and we also speak in those terms when describing our experiences with the Web. We say that we “...are going to a Web site...” when we type a URL or a Web address into a browser as if the site were actually a place on the planet.

**And, if the Web site is supporting an actual geographical location, well, so much the better.**

The City of Cambridge, Massachusetts ([www.cambridgema.gov](http://www.cambridgema.gov)) wanted to extend the access that its residents, local businesses, employees, and visitors already had to a host of services and information the city provided in its brick and mortar municipal buildings. And, the city also wanted to offer new and enhanced services, such as on-line bill payment.

“The city is composed of 48 departments located in 40 municipal buildings,” explained Mary P. Hart, the city’s MIS director. “There is so much that the city offers in terms of services and information. That amount continues to grow and frankly had become unwieldy. Before we launched this site, it had become inconvenient for people to access much of what we offer. I’m sure there were times when people simply gave up looking.”

**A partnership: Strong design and technology expertise to build totally integrated sites**

Cambridge turned to Studio 180 and Blue Note Technology, two award-winning businesses that have joined forces to supply forward-thinking clients like the City of Cambridge with robust, navigable, database-driven Web sites. “Outsourcing is the way we do things, and we don’t mind working with multiple vendors, although while working with Studio 180 and Blue Note we always felt we were working with just one vendor,” said Hart.

While still operating as two distinct firms, Studio 180 and Blue Note Technology have developed a cooperative and noncompetitive partnership whereby each organization delivers its particular expertise to a project.

Studio 180’s skill lies in graphic and Web design, and it acts as the client liaison and also designs the site’s branding, user interface, and navigation. “We focus on the user’s experience,” explained Gretta Olton, one of Studio 180’s two principals.

Blue Note Technology concentrates on the site’s back end, with Blue Note’s content management application anchoring all of the functionality related to delivering content to the user. “We do technology with an emphasis on the database,” said Jim Noonan, Blue Note’s chief operations officer.

Both Studio 180 and Blue Note will agree that while every site they work on is different, there are elements that are common to every site. "Our main goals are to make sure the site responds quickly when there's a call to the database, that the site is secure, scalable, and reliable, and that the content is easy to maintain and update," said Blue Note's Noonan.

While the back end of a site—the database and all of its accompanying software—can be technically impressive, if the user can't negotiate the site, all effort is for naught. This is where Studio 180 comes in. "We concern ourselves with the users coming to the site and we try to ensure they have a path to quickly get to the information they want, and if they're just browsing that they don't get lost in the site," said Olton.

### **The site: A true reflection of the city of Cambridge**

People are using their computers more, conducting more aspects of their lives online. They not only want to do things online, they are demanding it, and in the case of Cambridge, elected officials have to respond to their constituents. For a city that is bound by two world-class universities—Harvard to the west and MIT to the east—the cambridgema.gov site was almost an inevitability.

"Everything we do is focused on providing information through technology efficiently and effectively," said Hart about Cambridge's MIS department. "Budgets are getting cut, costs and demand are going up, but technology is getting better."

The site gives people a single portal to access the entire enterprise of Cambridge. "You don't need multiple systems, you don't need special applications on the desktop," said Hart. "If you have a browser and an Internet connection you can access our site from anywhere in the world."

The information on the site is organized into three broad groups: information needed by people who live or work in the city, or who are visiting Cambridge. Color and images mimic Cambridge's trademark brick buildings and sidewalks. Photography depicts the diversity of people who make up Cambridge's city life. Elements of the interface, including typography, color, banners, and titles, all support directed navigation as well as casual browsing, and all are presented in a consistent manner to orient end users and ensure they don't get lost in the site.

To build the back end of a site, Blue Note starts with its content management application as the core, as well as other applications, such as one for online bill payment, that are integrated into the system. A large degree of customization is performed for each site, and Cambridge's was no exception. As an example, Cambridge wanted a page where all municipal departments could be accessed. Blue Note needed to write the code for the content management application to retrieve the names of all the departments, paint them on a page, and build a link to each individual department's pages.

Blue Note also had to consider the people who maintained the site. Cambridge required that non-technical departmental personnel be able to update the site. "With Blue Note's content management, you don't need an expert to make the changes," said Hart. "If you can create a Word document, you can make a Web file for our site."

### **Proof: A site can enhance our world and add value**

Before the new site was deployed, Cambridge would record approximately 100,000 hits per day—calculated as unique visits to a page. Two months after deployment, the site averaged 150,000 hits per day, and that number is growing. "We attribute the increased visits to the new design and functionality that Studio 180 and Blue Note gave to our site," said Carol Chung, Cambridge's Webmaster.

Cambridgema.gov provides a simple access point for the diverse population of Cambridge. The site proves that sites developed and built by professionals with the right design, branding, and technological expertise can add value to an

enterprise while also extending and enhancing our physical world.

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