



Sitecore Case Study:



George School



George School – Coed boarding school wins prestigious CASE Gold Award and increases site traffic by 72% with Sitecore

Summary

The mission of the George School site is to become a digital touchstone: the school's primary marketing vehicle; a communication hub with the extended George School community; and an internal resource serving current students, parents, faculty, and staff. They rebuilt their site from the ground up using Sitecore. George School is the only independent school, college, or university to receive a CASE Circle of Excellence "Complete Institutional Website" Gold Award in three years and the first independent school to win a CASE Circle of Excellence website award of any level since 2004.

Challenge

Founded in 1893 by members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), George School, a rigorous coed boarding and day school for grades nine through twelve, educates students from twenty-one states, thirty-four foreign countries, and a variety of ethnic, racial, religious, and economic backgrounds.

George School's previous website felt very static, yet it was taking a lot of time to manage. The site was basically a "view book" that existed online. There was a tiny bit of dynamic content, including a fledgling online calendar, but the overall site wasn't reflective of the school.

According to Ari Betof, George School's Director of Enrollment Management & Strategic Planning, "We wanted to design our site to be a genuine reflection of

who we are. By having the site serve as an authentic window into the George School community, we are better able to attract applicants for whom we are a good fit. We are able to focus on our target market and those families who might be looking for a different kind of school can spend their time elsewhere."

The prior site was managed with an in-house solution—a combination of one third HTML code, one third Dreamweaver, and one third Access database—and managed by just one half-time web person. According to Betof, the site had several significant limitations. The site lacked flexibility and was:

- Incredibly static
- Unscalable
- Inefficient to manage, especially updating images

continued inside

The George School Site

www.georgeschool.org



www.sitecore.net



Solution

George School partnered with mStoner, a Sitecore certified partner, who provides smart, sustainable communication solutions to the nonprofit community and organizations that serve that sector. Twenty-one months elapsed between inception and launch, including five months of RFP development and partner selection, and sixteen months of intake, design, and implementation. The website project used an integrated planning model, bringing together multiple constituency groups at the start of the process then regularly seeking their input and feedback along the way.

Drawing from the George School's rich history in print publications, the team aspired to a voice that was playful and a design that was tactile and unusual. Says Betof, "We sought a website that would evoke the essence of George School within a technical infrastructure that could grow and evolve with us over time."

The CMS was a key piece of the project, and George School only looked at .NET products. The team was clear that they only wanted to "tear the building down to the studs" one time, so it had to be done right.

They wanted to find a product that was:

- Going to evolve at the rate that they wanted to be innovative
- User friendly for both site administrators and content editors
- Flexible to allow them to be extremely creative with the design

According to Betof, Sitecore customer service did several things that demonstrated Sitecore's customer-focused paradigm, a significant factor in the final selection from several different robust products. As an example, Betof sites that George School

was one of the first U.S.-based organizations to get a preview of the newest version of Sitecore (v6) before it was released. The inline functionality was an important factor in George School's decision.

"Another factor," says Betof, "was that Sitecore was transparent in the evaluation process providing fair and balanced answers to our questions. We wanted to build a relationship with a company that would work with us moving forward, and we felt that Sitecore – more than any of the other vendors – was honest, open, and helpful."

When George School took on this project, they knew they could approach it one of two ways:

1. A web "repainting" – taking all of the content, making it more appealing, and putting it back up on the site; or,
2. A web overhaul – where they would "tear down the house of cards" and rebuild it from the ground up.

According to Betof, "We felt that if we built from the ground up, we could only do it once – and we believed Sitecore was the right 'steel' to build with."

Results

The result is a site that is simple to navigate yet complex in tone. Early indicators are extremely positive. In the five months post-shakeout, website traffic has increased 72% and unique visitors increased 42%. The average time on the site is 2:22 minutes. Admission inquiries for boarding, one of the George School's target audiences, have increased 20%, and completed boarding applications have increased 53%

compared to the previous four-year average. More prospective students are looking at George School and a higher percentage of those looking are completing applications.

As an international boarding school, George School's web site is the cornerstone of their marketing approach – it's how people get a first sense about George School. At the same time, the website is an interactive part of daily life at the school. The site:

- Serves as a resource for students and staff
- Offers a way for parents to stay connected to the life of their boarding students
- Allows George School to interact with and be a contributing member of the local community, including sharing:
 - Schedule of events, including art performances that are open to the public
 - Information about summer camps and other programs on campus that are available to the public

Recently, someone told Betof that the web site feels like being on campus. He says, "To me that is the highest praise. Our goal was for this site to be a reflection of the special community we are."

Unique Design Elements

George School has been able to harness the flexibility of Sitecore to create an interesting and unique design. Some examples of the design elements on the site include:

- **Collages:** They were able to create online "collages" by overlaying text with images, the calendar and a scrolling photo bar. An example of this can be seen here: <http://www.georgeschool.org/Arts.aspx>
- **Seasonal information:** The links in the "I want to" section change based on time of year, and correlate to what visitors might be looking for at a particular point in time. An example of this can be seen here: <http://www.georgeschool.org/Academics.aspx>
- **Topic-based navigation:** This allows users to enter into audience-defined areas of the site, and the topic-based navigation then repackages user-based interfaces in the form of gateway pages. For example, within the Friends and Neighbors gateway visitors can see information about the children's center program, the day camp can highlight quotes, and timely information can be shared (i.e., information about the 2009 H1N1 flu). This allows the George School to share messages with constituency groups that then can be linked to additional information in a secure portal as necessary. An example of this can be seen here: <http://www.georgeschool.org/Neighbors.aspx>

continued on back



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- **Embedded video:** The George School has been able to seamlessly embed video on the site. So rather than having a big square video on a page, they have embedded the video element into the content and design of the site. Two different implementation options can be seen here: <http://www.georgeschool.org/Campus%20Life.aspx> and <http://www.georgeschool.org/About%20GS/Quakerism.aspx>
- **Customized academic course listings:** Site visitors can imagine their course load by selecting the appropriate discipline, grade and program from drop-down boxes in the Academics section of the site. This offers visitors instant, personalized information, while saving the George School thousands in printing costs that used to be allocated for annual printing of a curriculum guide, all while offering a more earth-friendly solution: <http://www.georgeschool.org/Academics/Courses%20and%20Course%20Planning/Courses%20by%20Discipline/Science.aspx>
- **Interactive athletics section:** coaches can go in and add directions, contest results, highlights, media coverage, and more.
- **Campus maps:** The George School will be enhancing its online maps with LightBox, to include pictures and descriptions of campus maps.

independent school, college, or university to receive a “Complete Institutional Website” Gold Award in three years. The category received 56 entries for the 2009 competition, and a total of 130 entries since 2007. George School is the first independent school to win a CASE Circle of Excellence website award of any level since 2004.

“George School did the best job of conveying a sense of the institution,” noted CASE judges in their report. “We noted that the writing was exceptional, the site was well-organized, it was consistent, and that there was a lot going on, but it wasn’t cluttered or crowded. And aside from its impressive results, it met other objectives, including conveying the essence of the school to prospective students/parents while rekindling interest among alumni.” In addition, the report praised the website for being clearly rooted in the traditions of the school.

Technology Description

Solution Special Ingredients

LightBox for image management

Google Maps for mapping functionality

Google Mini Appliance for search

Award-Winning Site

George School received a Gold Award in the “Complete Institutional Website” category of the 2009 Circle of Excellence Awards, a professional recognition program run by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). George School is the only



Sitecore’s Web Content Management System (CMS) and portal software solutions enable companies to deliver compelling web experiences. Sitecore’s award-winning CMS software makes it easy for businesses to create and update dynamic, full-featured websites of all types. Sitecore’s industry leading flexibility and scalability allows companies to better leverage their content, improve customer experience and drive business growth.

Thousands of public and private organizations, including national governments and Fortune 500 companies utilize Sitecore solutions for their websites. These organizations have created and now manage more than 20,000 dynamic websites with Sitecore including Microsoft, Sara Lee, Siemens, Toshiba, Omni Hotels, Computer Associates, ISS and Atlanta Falcons. Sitecore has offices and representatives in more than 50 countries around the world.

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