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Web Development for the Home Builders Associoation Serving Portage and Summit Counties

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Web Development for the Home Builders Association Serving Portage and Summit
Counties

Gail Lewis White

School of Communication

Honors Research Project

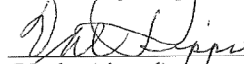
Submitted to

The Honors College

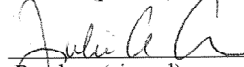
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 Date 10/20/14
Honors Project Sponsor (signed)

Dr. Sylvia E. White
Honors Project Sponsor (printed)

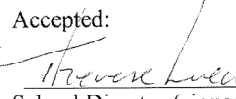
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Gail Lewis White

Major: Business and Organizational Communication

Project Sponsor: Dr. Sylvia White

Number of Project Credits: 3

Abstract

This Honors project redesigned the website of the Home Builders Association serving greater Portage and Summit counties (HBA). The goal of the new website was to enhance the social media image and internet presence of the HBA. The project included a competitive analysis of competing websites throughout the construction industry and a thorough analysis of the HBA's internal and external communications. Under the supervision of Vice President of Operations Carmine Torio, this project has met and surpassed the goals set by both the organization and myself. The primary objectives of the Home Builders Association were to create a website which increases the value of the association by serving as an extension of the organization. These web pages have been created in order to communicate the company's objectives, promote its upcoming events and ongoing services and stimulate two-way communication with the desired internal and external audiences of potential home builders, contractors, tradesmen and associates.

Literature Review

“A total of 46 percent of US consumers have cancelled plans to spend with a small business after discovering a poor quality website,” according to research released by 1&1 Internet Inc. (Press Release 2014). Countless organizations fail to fully comprehend the importance of quality web development. When corporations choose to utilize the Internet as a tool, it is essential to develop and implement web pages which embody and enhance an organization’s corporate imagery and market positioning. However, statistics prove otherwise in a great number of instances.

For my honors project, I chose to assist the Home Builders Association of Portage and Summit Counties with the development of a well-designed, usable business web site. After meeting with officials at the HBA, we decided that an enhanced Internet image is a necessity for the organization. This literature review, discussions with the HBA, my instruction in Web Development, Public Relations and Marketing at the University of Akron, serve as the foundation and outline for the web development project.

With the textbook Web Style Guide 3rd Edition, Patrick Lynch and Sarah Horton (2011) evaluate and define the initial stages of the website design process. Lynch and Horton contend that it is very important to communicate the goals of the organization during the initial planning phase when developing a website. A brief statement denoting two or three objectives should serve as the foundation of a web site’s design and the outline for all web development plans. This initial statement should include specific strategies about how the proposed website will be designed, how long it will take, specified construction methods and what evaluation techniques will be employed to assess its performance.

Lynch and Horton (2011) also advise developers to utilize web analytics as a planning tool and group critiques to explore what makes a web site successful. A web developer should compile a substantial inventory of content pertaining to the organization which may be featured on future web pages. A brief statement confirming objectives along with the compilation of a content inventory will serve as the primary phase for this web development project.

Furthermore, Ilya Pozin (2014) evaluated the initial stages of website development and outlined five essential steps needed for successful web site design. According to Pozin, web developers and organizations must plan in advance how they wish to get users to their websites. They should know who will be using it and anticipate what questions visitors will have. Pozin contends that web developers should know what their visitors plan to do and also how they prefer to communicate. “Most people really don’t know how to plan their site” (Pozin 2014). Defining objectives and goals during the planning phase ensures that organizations implement the correct approaches.

Next, developers must ensure that they take universal usability into account during web development procedures. Lynch and Horton (2011) explain that usability is a measure of effectiveness. It defines the efficiency of the tools and information sources employed to accomplish tasks. The most effective websites successfully reduce operational limitations for users.

The main principal behind universal usability maintains that web pages should be beneficial for individuals with a varied level of computer skills and abilities. Lynch and Horton (2011) note that usable websites are flexible, simple and intuitive. Plus, they communicate relevant information easily to users. Krug (2014) explains that the some of

the most important steps to take to ensure usability are to add appropriate alternative text to every image, insure that all forms work with screen readers, make all content accessible by keyboards and never use java script without a good reason. Universal usability shall be taken into consideration during this process in accordance with the previously stated research.

Information architecture defines the conceptual models and designs used to plan, structure and assemble an effective website. Lynch and Horton (2011) explain that the information architecture forms the crucial planning bridge between general discussions of goals and the technical solutions employed in the completed website. When considering a website's information architecture, designers should realize it is imperative to begin organizing information by creating a hierarchical outline, inventorying content and drawing diagrams that illustrate the proposed website's structure. Krug (2014) notes that web pages with clear visual hierarchies have two important characteristics. The most important information is prominently displayed, and items that are related logically are also related visually. A website's information architecture should be planned in advance of the construction of actual web pages and serves as a critical component in web design procedures.

Equally important is the interface design. Lynch and Horton (2011) explain that users of web documents don't just look at information, they interact with it in novel ways that have no precedents in paper document design. Web users prefer to scan documents rather than read them in their entirety. Audiences should always be able to maintain a sense of where they are within a website, therefore adequate navigational tools are of extreme importance. In the book "Don't Make Me Think," Steve Krug (2014) explains that

one of the first rules should be to ensure that web pages are “self-evident” and “obvious” to the audience. When individuals access the web they like to do so without experiencing overwhelming complications.

Krug (2014) explains, “Things people should not have to think about are where they are, where to begin, where did we put that, what are the most important things on the page, and why did we call it that.” (p. 17). In addition, users should always know what organization they are dealing with, what document they are reading, and when the information being provided was produced and edited. All web communications should be presented in a clear, coherent manner containing the proper corporate symbols. Plus, all information should be in line with the organization’s positioning (Krug 2014). Lynch and Horton (2011) note that an effective web presence can be a powerful tool for enhancing the status and competitive positioning of an enterprise, but only if the web site effectively projects a feeling of trust in the knowledge and competence of the organization. Proper interface design ensures that users are not easily confused or lost while navigating a website.

The structure of the proposed website is the next essential element to consider. Site structure determines how a webpage will be accessed by software and indexed by search engines. In the article, “10 Tips to a Great Web Page” Jennifer Kyrin (n.d.) contends that a primary focus should be to ensure that web sites load quickly and provide readers with the information they seek immediately. Lynch and Horton (2011) add that proper use of html is the key to getting maximum flexibility and return on your investment in web content. Effective websites successfully employ features which are utilized repeatedly across every page in a website such as navigational links and header graphics.

Cascading Style Sheets allow developers to implement linked web pages which every page in a website shares. Krug (2014) notes that “Cascading Style Sheets are now so well supported by most browsers that it doesn’t make sense to create a site without them” (p. 178). Cascading Style Sheets allow designers to maintain greater control of formatting, increased flexibility and consistency among browsers (Krug 2014). Using Cascading Style Sheets is an integral component in the design process.

In addition, Lynch and Horton (2011) note that search engine optimization techniques ensure that websites are designed well and reduce the likelihood of burying important information while constructing a web site. Using Cascading Style Sheets proves to be beneficial in that regard as well. Cascading Style Sheets allow developers to automatically resize text and serialize content, which improves search engine accessibility (Krug 2014). Site structure determines whether or not a website will be highly operational; therefore, it is a concept that must be thoroughly considered.

Furthermore, organizations and developers must take individual page structure into account. Lynch and Horton (2011) note that experienced web designers use headers, columns and footers in the basic page structure. Successful web developers expertly utilize web protocols and conventions to create websites that are distinguishable, brand-appropriate and engaging. Lynch and Horton (2011) explain that, as the web has matured over the past decade, the structure of web pages in text-driven information sites has become more uniform and predictable. All websites do not have to maintain the exact same layouts and features; however, most web pages incorporate many of the same basic components in locations that have become familiar to Internet users.

Also, according to Lynch and Horton (2011) web users seek clarity, order and trustworthiness in information sources. Effective web page designs provide users with these things. Lynch and Horton explain that spatial organization of information can engage users, divert their attention, prioritize information and make interactions more enjoyable and efficient. It is imperative to remember that the visual stimulation provided by shapes, colors and contrast are what make web pages interesting and engage audience members. Successfully designed web pages attract users, while poorly designed pages can harm an organization's reputation.

Next, Lynch and Horton (2011) discuss the effective implementation of typography. Lynch and Horton note that good typography establishes a visual hierarchy for rendering prose on the page by providing visual punctuation and graphic accents that help readers understand relations between prose and pictures, headlines and subordinate blocks of text. Typography provides both verbal and visual communication on web pages. Lynch and Horton explain that designers should select fonts, inter-paragraph spacing, size of subheads etc. and then create a written style guide to help maintain these settings as the site is developed. It is imperative that web developers understand the importance of utilizing consistent and legible typography when putting together web pages.

Graphics and illustrations play an important role in web pages as well. According to Lynch and Horton (2011) good diagrams and interesting illustrations create documents that are distinct and memorable. In addition, employing consistent identity and interface graphics across web pages effectively outlines the boundaries within a web site. There is no need for site-defining, identity graphics to be overly elaborate, but they should be consistent across the range of pages within a website in order for users to establish a sense

that the website is a “discrete region.” Graphics are tremendously important, because they can enhance the identity of a website and organization and provide essential information when utilized correctly.

When editing completed web pages organizations should employ certain specific web-related tactics. Documents written to be read online should be concise and structured for scanning. It is essential that websites avoid catchy but meaningless headings, and important facts and information should be placed at the beginning of stories. Web pages should highlight important sections and significant words by utilizing typographical emphasis. Long paragraphs should be broken down into smaller sections containing headers, and organization should create content with a global audience in mind. Lastly, all subject matter should be focused and easily understood (Lynch & Horton 2011).

Employing these editorial techniques will help organizations appeal to online audiences.

The Internet allows users to access web pages which combine text, graphics, music, and video formats. It is best to incorporate stable technologies that work on the majority of computers and mobile devices (Lynch & Horton 2011). Kyrin (n.d.) suggests focusing on fast pages and keeping them short but not too short. Ensuring that graphics and other files are small will increase loading speeds. Organizations run the risk of losing audience members when users experience problems gaining access to content. Lynch and Horton (2011) explain that graphics, animations, video and sound should only be used when they are essential and relevant to the message. It is paramount to ensure that files are small enough to be accessed by the largest possible audience and all technologies being implemented are widely used.

The Project

The Home Builders Association of Portage and Summit Counties' is a trade association that was established in 1943 which represents the interests of residential builders, multi-family, light commercial and remodeling contractors and their consumers (Homebuilders Assoc – About Us 2003). The HBA consists of over 500 member firms that handle every aspect of home construction and remodeling. Also, the HBA has joined with the Better Business Bureau of Akron to provide alternate dispute resolution services to all its members and their customers. According to the HBA's mission statement, the goals of the organization are leading the building industry, creating and strengthening neighborhoods, providing economic growth and advancing the education and professionalism of members to benefit the community.

The proposed website for the HBA will take into account the procedures and concepts previously detailed in this report. The HBA's internal and external audiences must be considered. Their internal audience consists of their members and their external audience contains individuals who are interested in new homes and remodeling projects. An effective website for this organization must consist of interesting and insightful information that is appealing to these groups in addition to the global audience.

The HBA wants to identify its members on its site, advertise relevant information and sponsored events, and implement a "Get a Quote" page similar to the one found on the Better Business Bureau web site. In addition, their website should include the organization's logo and contact information in the header, a contact us page and appropriate navigational tools. Adhering to the guidelines and concepts stipulated by the previously mentioned literature will ensure success in this endeavor.

Conclusion

A large number of small businesses possess poorly designed websites which adversely affect the bottom line (Press Release 2014). Initially the HBA was no different in that regard. However, the organization felt that it was important to address the issue as soon as possible. While working as an intern for the HBA during the spring semester of 2014, I discovered the organization was planning to contract a local company to develop a new website for them, so I volunteered for the job.

My primary objective was to utilize the skills and education that I have obtained at The University of Akron in order to do provide a service for a local non-profit organization. My time interning for the HBA, and the positive experiences I had working with its members, made me want to assist the organization in this project.

Overall, this honors project has met and exceeded the expectations set by the Home Builders Association serving greater Portage and Summit counties (HBA) and my own expectations. The organization's primary objective was an updated and enhanced website. With the assistance of HBA Vice-President Carmine Torio, completely new web pages have been constructed that provide improved usability, adaptability, site navigation and overall design. On the whole, this project serves to promote the HBA's services and inspire two-way communication in addition to communicating the association's brand message and upcoming events.

This project began in March of 2014. My first step was to conduct extensive research in regard to the client, their industry and competitors. Primary research included interviews and observation of HBA personnel, an analysis of websites within the home builders industry as well as an extensive review of HBA publications. Consequently,

significant discoveries were made in regard to the HBA's communication practices and their relationship with their primary public of small businesses.

Based on this research, the background graphics, website content and design elements were selected. Previously published HBA videos, articles, pamphlets and brochures served as vital inspiration. The existing HBA website failed to communicate a general theme and specific purpose. Overall, this website serves as an extension of the HBA's primary operational objective which is to register new members to their non-profit association.

Throughout this process, several meetings and revisions were necessary before a final design was approved by Mr. Torio. Initially, I underestimated the amount of time and dedication required to fulfill the client's demands. Nevertheless, this honors project has provided me with valuable experience in dealing with client demands and overcoming objections in a professional setting. During the development of this website, I used the knowledge I gained from courses within the School of Communication including Web Design, Public Speaking, Persuasion, Public Relations and Interpersonal Communication. Without question, this project forced me to go beyond the initial goals I set.

Since day one, Mr. Torio mandated that this procedure be performed using WordPress software, software I was not familiar with. Therefore, several instructional videos and articles were necessary in order to acquire the knowledge needed in order to develop this website. However, due to the selection of WordPress software there were also limitations imposed on this project in terms of page formatting, media file placement and font selection. For example, the front page formatting does not allow for site navigation at

the bottom of the page and forces developers to utilize a sans-serif font only. Still, despite these issues all parties are pleased with the outcome.

Next, it was important to improve the adaptability of the HBA's site, so WordPress's "Responsive Theme" was selected because it automatically adjusts to smart phones and mobile devices.

Previously, web users became lost while navigating the HBA's website due to the lack of universal navigation features. Therefore, during this project, site navigation was a primary focus for improvement.

After that, it was important to add two-way communication features, so a "Contact Us" page was added. Previously, the HBA website did not have one. Upgrades were made to existing pages and this completed assignment serves as a welcome addition to my professional portfolio.

While I achieved most of the goals set, the project was not without problems. In addition to having to learn new software, getting timely feedback from the HBA was difficult. The HBA operates with a fulltime staff of just three employees. This added considerably to the amount of time and effort I had to expend to complete the project. In the end, the Home Builders Association serving greater Portage and Summit counties received a much needed upgrade to their website using software they feel confident they can use to maintain the website in the future. I received a needed addition to my portfolio demonstrating my web development abilities for potential employers and clients. I also gained valuable insight into how to work with clients in a professional setting.

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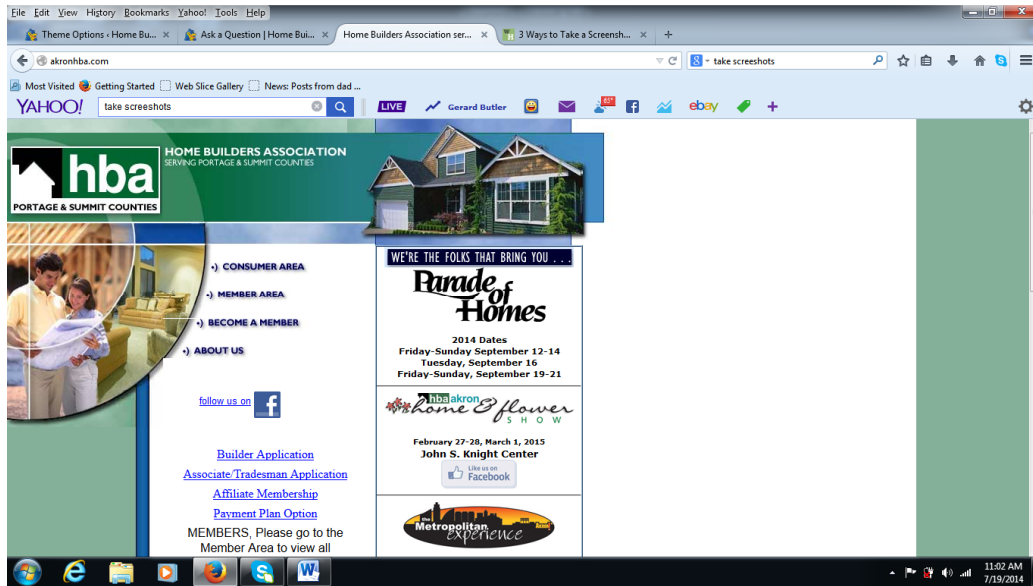
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Berkeley: New Riders

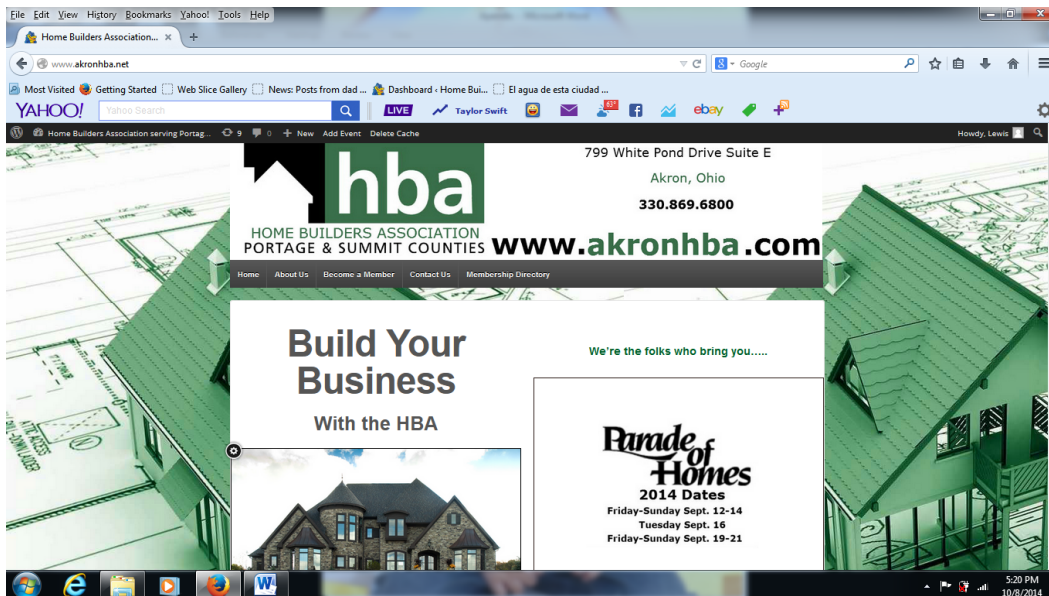
Appendix A

The Redesign of existing pages

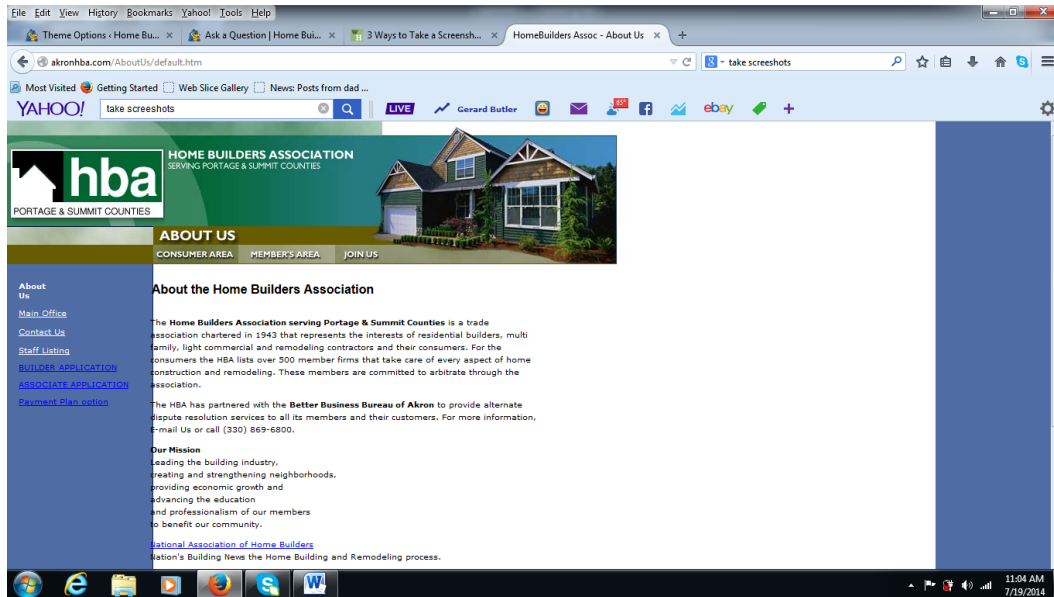
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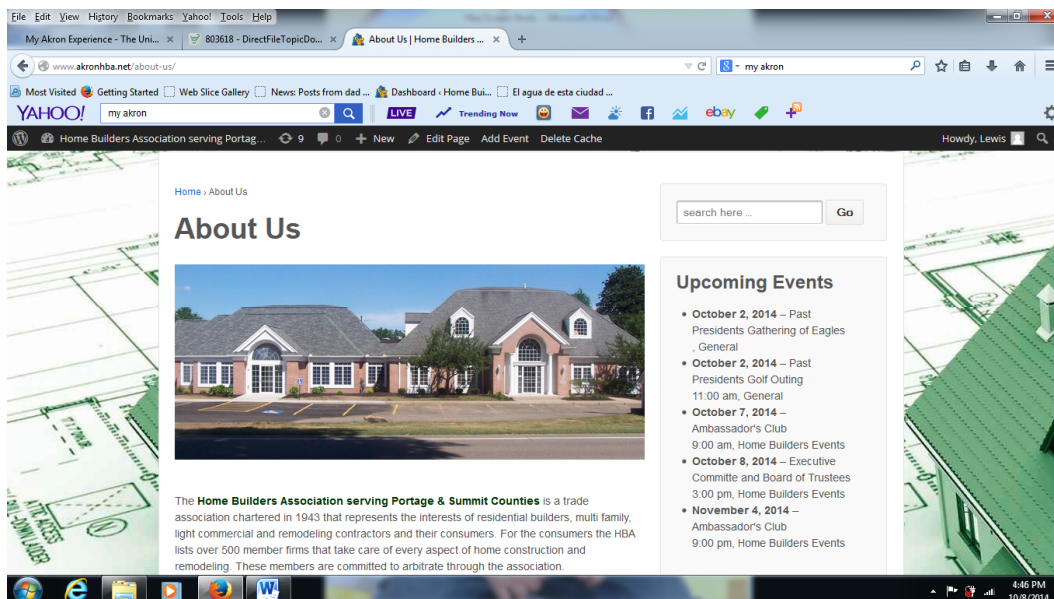
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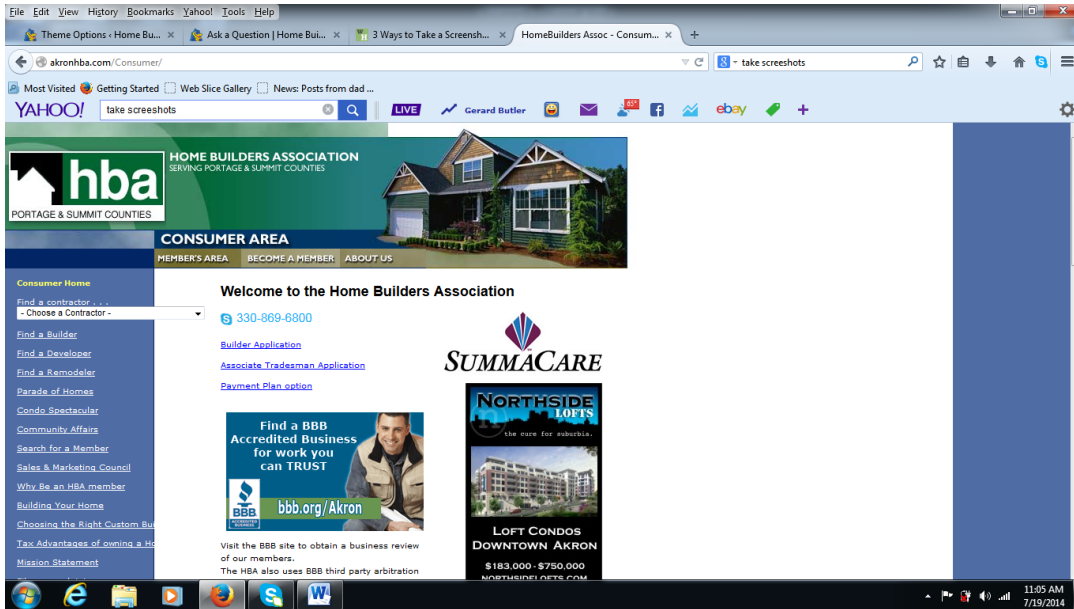
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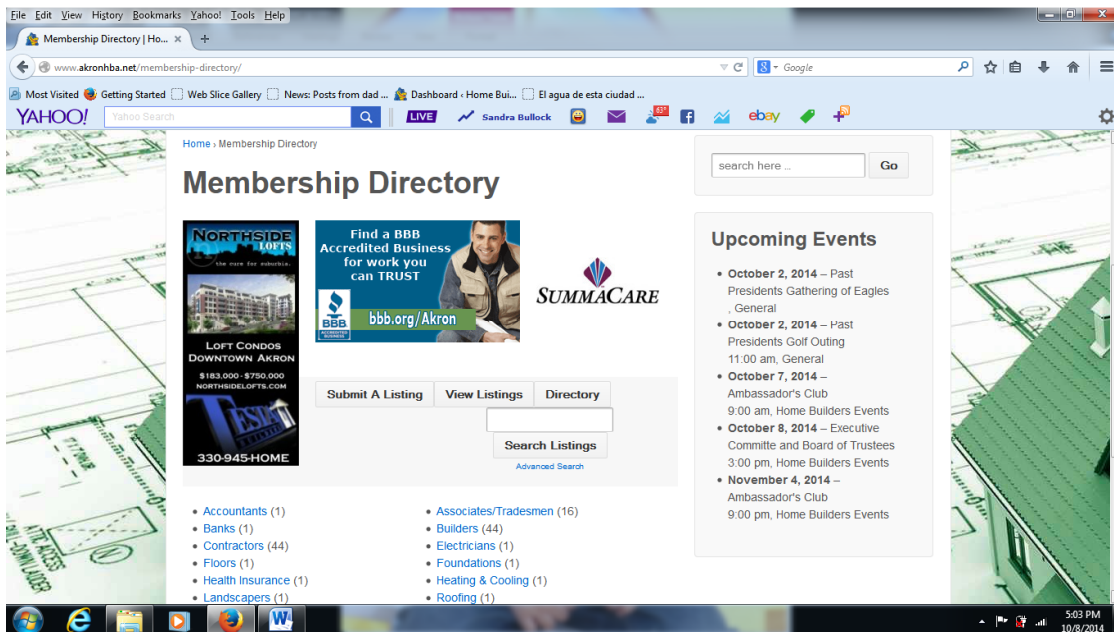
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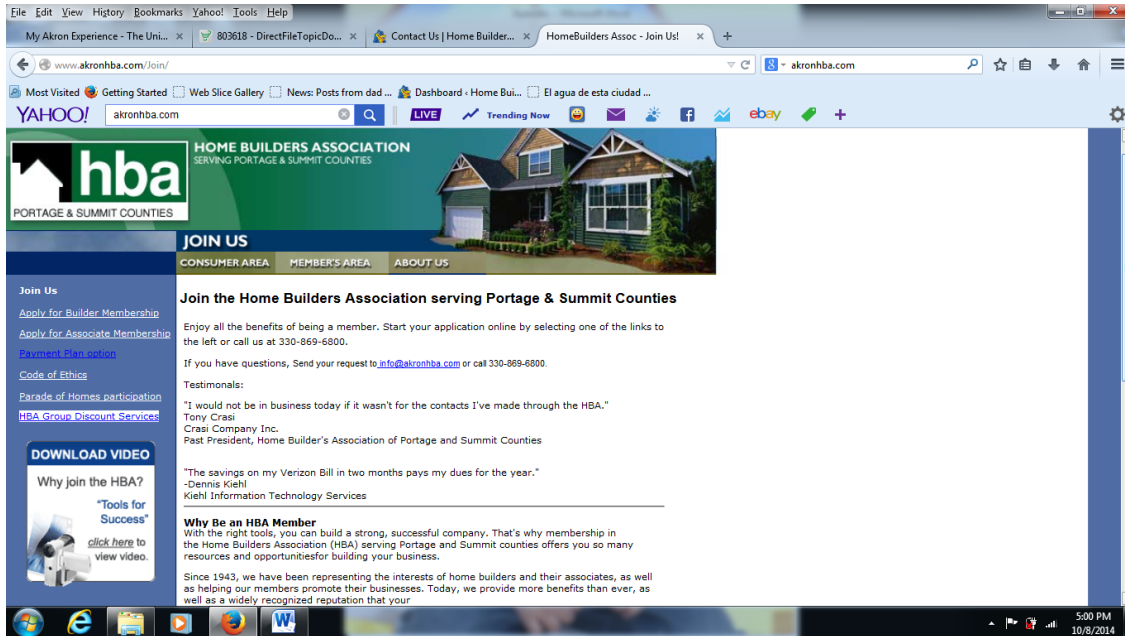
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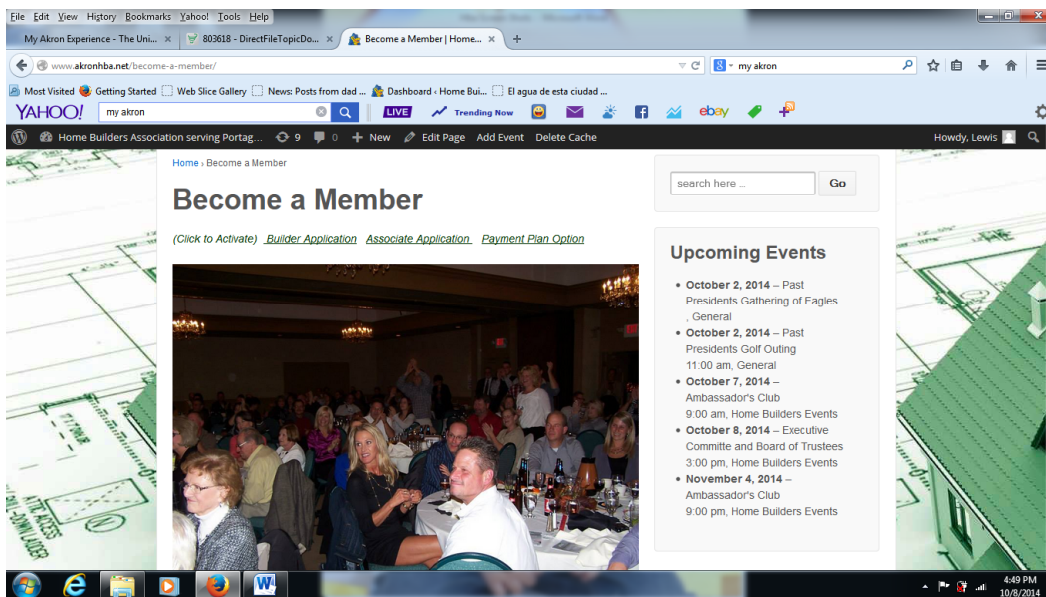
Membership Directory Page after:



Become a Member page before:



Become a Member Page after:



Appendix B

Additional Web Page Implemented

Contact Us:

