

SITE-IN-A-BOX FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA: MAKING STAYING ON-BRAND FASTER, CHEAPER AND EASIER THAN GOING ROGUE

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The Need

Founded in 1885, the University of Arizona represents a community of thousands of faculty and staff, and tens of thousands of undergraduate and graduate students. We are twenty colleges made up of individuals working in an endless variety of professional fields, from the sciences to the humanities and from medicine to the arts. In short, we are a positively immense enterprise.

In such a massive, diversified environment, the web represents a primary avenue for communication. Researchers, students, faculty and staff always need new websites. A new grant needs to be tracked and documented. A new cross-disciplinary lab needs to share its accomplishments and collaborate with other institutions. A campus-wide event is planned and needs a website for promotion.

These “rapid-fire” web needs come in literally every day. And more often than not, not only do they have tight timelines, but they have little to no funding for design, development and hosting.

The result? Many choose the path of least resistance and create hastily developed, low-quality web experiences. They “go rogue” (egads!) and hire a nephew or a cousin or a graduate student to get the job done as fast as possible.

In the end, the job gets done, the final product goes live, and the site communicates the information as intended. Success, right?

Wrong.

Costs, Trade-offs and Sacrifices

Such a website might accomplish its immediate goal of getting the message out to the intended audience. But at what cost?

- **The site owner suffers:** When developed by non-web professionals, sites lack professional exteriors and interiors. Even though their information might be excellent, bad design and unoptimized programming (i.e., coding that may be slow, not leverage

the latest techniques, may not take search engine optimization into account, etc.) distract the user from the information at hand, and can even erode trust in the message itself.

- **The IT department takes a hit:** Since the true owners of the technical side of things have been left out of the development loop, they are often brought in too late to help support odd or misguided technology choices that could have been avoided with more informed decision making early in the development cycle. Also, these sites have a greater risk of being hacked. “Going rogue” often ends up costing a great deal more time and effort to fix problems that could have been avoided with proper knowledge and execution at the outset.
- **The individual entity’s brand is bartered away in exchange for speed:** If the individual has not properly integrated the appropriate branding into their site design, they fail to take advantage of the gravitas that the institutional brand brings to their story. They might have moved fast, but at the cost of an essential strength of their story.
- **The institutional brand is sacrificed:** At the same time that the individual suffers, so the entire university suffers. That individual’s fantastic work is left unassociated with the greater University brand, and thus cannot contribute to its reputation.

The Situation & the Solution

Currently, the University has over 2,500 websites. University Information Technology Services (UITS) hosts and maintains a subset of these websites, providing such services directly to the staff of the University.

In 2011, University Relations Marketing and UTS came together to discuss the shape of a solution to such challenges. Looking at simple blog sites like Wordpress.com and Blogger.com, we asked ourselves:

If visitors to those sites can go online and instantly create a fully designed site, ready for content integration, imagery and content structuring, why can’t we?

So we looked into it. We found that we could – affordably – create such a solution. So that’s exactly what we did.

We built “Site-in-a-Box.”

Development of the Product/Service

The UA brought on an external vendor to develop the technology for Site-in-a-Box at a cost of \$12,000. Initial development took approximately 4 months, and piloting the system prior to general launch took an additional 8 months.

The Site-in-a-Box Service

Site-in-a-Box gives campus units a professionally designed, customizable, feature-rich University of Arizona website, all in just a matter of days – not the weeks or months expected for normal web development cycles.

Who tends to need such a service? We saw the demand emerging from research labs to student groups to clubs to academic departments. No matter what group we asked, we always found people who:

- Needed a website NOW.
- Had little to no funding to hire a developer.
- Were able to use content management tools but did not have site development experience.
- Had no idea what “patching and scanning” were, much less how to perform such required tasks.
- Had little to no knowledge of branding guidelines or the design know-how to implement them.

Every Site-in-a-Box web presence is:

- Professionally designed, with customizable University of Arizona web branding.
- Easy-to-manage, based on the Drupal 7 platform for easy content management.
- Mobile-responsive, designed from the ground up to display perfectly on any device, from desktops to tablets to smartphones (and everything in between).
- Quick-to-launch; websites are live and ready for content managers to start adding content within two business days (if not sooner).
- Secure, hosted on the newest server at the University of Arizona’s UITs computing center where it is updated, patched, scanned and backed up to adhere to internal quality standards.

Out of the box, Site-in-a-Box websites are configured with a rich menu of standard features most frequently request by clients, such as:

- A limited choice of UA color palettes and navigation styles
- Customizable design areas to brand each site, including a home page slideshow
- A calendar of events
- A directory of people
- A news feed, configurable to pull from any RSS source
- A blog
- An FAQ page
- A site search, optimizable with content tagging

- Easy content management with Drupal’s WYSIWYG content editor
- Integrated social media links
- Integrated Google analytics
- Fully customizable web forms to collect survey data, manage event RSVPs or any other application where simple online data collection is needed

Modeled for Long-term Success

When it came to developing the product scope and the pricing and service models for Site-in-a-Box, our first step was to consider staffing: neither University Relations nor UITS were staffed to provide ongoing support for the potentially hundreds of website clients who might quickly desire the service. To address this issue, we developed our modeling based on these principles:

- 1) **Simplicity:** We limited the feature set so that a user with a solid working knowledge of Microsoft Word could manage the content of a Site-in-a-Box site.
- 2) **Subscription:** We structured the service on a subscription model, which created multiple benefits. It kept the price low, but it also allowed us to control the proliferation of “dead websites” that pile up on University servers. If yearly subscription is not renewed, the site is pulled down.
- 3) **Support:** With a simple user experience, we decided to create a system to facilitate a user community, creating connections for users to support one another, as opposed to relying on a tech support staff for help. In this way, we could keep staffing costs – and thus the price of the service – extremely low.

The real magic of Site-in-a-Box lies in the price tag. At \$180 per year, subscribers get an arizona.edu subdomain, hosting on the University’s most advanced server, and all the security protections required by University policy.

Considering that initial development for similarly featured Drupal websites can easily run into the thousands of dollars and take months to develop, Site-in-a-Box is nothing short of a great deal.

Benefiting the Brand

And where did this all start? It came from a desire to strengthen the brand. In making Site-in-a-Box an attractive, affordable option, we now have clients clamoring for the service. But they are not just getting a quick-to-market website. They are getting:

- An approved University of Arizona site design – one that complies with all branding standards *and can be updated automatically as those standards evolve.*

- An “arizona.edu” subdomain, ensuring that they are immediately recognized as part of the UA family.
- A subscription model to ensure that their site will be around only as long as it’s cared for; once it stops getting attention – if the subscription is not paid – it comes down, thus ensuring that only “live” sites stay live.

From Rogue to Brand Advocate

In creating Site-in-a-Box, we needed guinea pigs. Luckily, we had groups lining up to help out from the get-go. Our initial pilot users represented a diverse group, hailing from a variety of departments, organizations and event owners, including:

- The UA Appointed Professionals Advisory Council
- Spring Fling
- AnimalWatch Vi Suite
- The Department of Micro & Cellular Biology
- The UA Staff Advisory Council
- The UA Trademarks and Licensing Office
- UA Toastmasters
- The UA Retirees Association

Many of these entities have completed their sites and are off and running. Others signed up quickly, learned to use the tools, but are still developing their content strategies.

Since its official launch in May 2013, Site-in-a-Box has truly taken off and is changing the face of how web site development is perceived and performed at the UA. The numbers show quick adoption of the strategy:

- We began with 8 pilot sites prior to product launch in May 2013.
- As of October 2013, we have 27 live clients and 20 more in development.
- **Total Site-in-a-Box websites: 47.**

In the short space of a few months, Site-in-a-Box is emerging as the University’s “go-to” solution for quick, easy, manageable websites.

So, what are the results?

- ✓ A technologically sound, secure, long term web strategy? Check.
- ✓ Saved money and more focused resource use? Check.
- ✓ Happy clients? Check.
- ✓ A stronger brand? Check.

Through thinking “inside the box,” we are reeling in the rogues and creating a stronger, more unified University of Arizona.

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