

Virginia LMSC Communications

Annual Report 2011

Submitted by Betsy Durrant (newsletter editor) and Chris Stevenson (webmaster/electronic communications), Oct 2011

The following methods of mass communication are facilitated collectively by the Newsletter Editor and the Webmaster:

- **Printed monthly newsletter**, *The Wet Gazette*, mailed to every registered member, unless s/he requests otherwise and “opts out” of receiving the printed newsletter. If members with the same last name have the same address, only one copy of the newsletter is sent to the address.
- **Monthly electronic mail** using the email marketing company *iContact*. The monthly message includes a link to the electronic version of the printed newsletter. The email is sent to all members who provided an address during registration; members have the ability to unsubscribe themselves.
- Information presented on the **LMSC website**, www.vaswim.org. The website was completely revamped this year using the WordPress platform; the new site launched in January. Besides containing a number of mostly static informational pages, about 10 news items blurbs are posted every month on the home page. Members can sign up to be notified when an item is posted via RSS or email alerts. There is no way to know how many follow the RSS feeds, but there are currently 9 subscribers to receive email alerts.
- The Virginia LMSC has a **Virginia Masters Swimming Facebook page**; new items are also posted there. The page currently has 80 followers. There is a **Chris Greene Lake Cable Swim Facebook group**, currently with 97 members. The CGL group was established in 2010 while the LMSC page was created in June 2011. The LMSC has a **Flickr Pro account** to store photos online; there are currently 498 photos in 23 sets; 210 photos (7 sets) were uploaded in 2011.

Printed Newsletter (*The Wet Gazette*)

Monthly issues of the Wet Gazette were sent to printer each month within the first few days of each month.

Unfortunately, when members receive the newsletter is quite varied. The newsletters are bar coded and sent bulk mail from Richmond. The further a member is from Richmond, the longer it seems to take. Sometimes they do not arrive in Virginia Beach until the end of the month. We see no solution for this since we do not want to pay postage for First Class.

Producing the newsletter is joint effort. Betsy encourages teams and individuals to send articles and photos. The biggest problem with photos is identifying the swimmers. It is important for the photographer to send the names with the photo. If Betsy goes online to Flickr accounts, sometimes they are labeled and sometimes they aren't. Betsy gathers the information sent and begins putting the newsletter together the last week of each month. The format that the printer uses requires the newsletter to have the number of pages in multiples of 4. Sometimes Betsy has to decide to cut or add articles to make it come out correctly.

When the newsletter is ready, Betsy converts it to a PDF file and emails it to the printer in Richmond. Meanwhile Lisa prepares a file of the addresses and sends it to Chris. Chris removes the names and addresses for those who have opted for the electronic version. Chris then sends the addresses to the printer who prints, addresses, bar codes and mails the newsletter.

A few days after sending the black and white copy to the printer, Betsy removes the black and white photos and substitutes color photos. She emails this version to Chris for posting on the website. After uploading the newsletter file,

Chris sends out the monthly email newsletter to the LMSC membership. The first item always contains a link to the *Wet Gazette* PDF and instructions on how to opt out of receiving the printed/mailed copy.

Betsy maintains a list of about 20 people outside our LMSC who receive the newsletter. She emails them the color copy. Newsletter costs for this year are shown below. VMST pays for one-third of the newsletter costs, and the LMSC pays the rest. Due to some turmoil at the printing office this year, the costs are more uncertain than usual; the *italicized, shaded* numbers are estimates. The November and (especially) December costs are projections; December's costs may be significantly higher as new members register for USMS. The cost per issue per person came out to \$0.97, higher than last year (\$0.87); this value was used to estimate costs when the data were not available.

Month	Cost	LMSC Share	VMST Share	LMSC Members	Mailed	Opt Outs	Cost/Issue	Savings
Jan	\$774.00	\$516.03	\$257.74	226	448	86	\$1.73	\$148.58
Feb	\$615.37	\$410.27	\$204.92	534	594	98	\$1.04	\$101.53
Mar	\$509.92	\$339.96	\$169.80	692	677	106	\$0.75	\$79.84
Apr	\$739.47	\$493.00	\$246.24	783	733	112	\$1.01	\$112.99
May	\$739.49	\$493.02	\$246.25	845	762	114	\$0.88	\$100.41
Jun	\$584.07	\$389.40	\$194.50	877	801	118	\$0.73	\$86.04
Jul	\$609.94	\$406.65	\$203.11	919	864	126	\$0.71	\$88.95
<i>Aug</i>	<i>\$857.19</i>	<i>\$571.49</i>	<i>\$285.44</i>	<i>990</i>	<i>888</i>	<i>129</i>	<i>\$0.97</i>	<i>\$124.52</i>
Sep	\$974.85	\$649.93	\$324.63	1017	894	131	\$0.88	\$115.39
<i>Oct</i>	<i>\$871.67</i>	<i>\$581.14</i>	<i>\$290.27</i>	<i>1025</i>	<i>903</i>	<i>137</i>	<i>\$0.97</i>	<i>\$132.25</i>
<i>Nov</i>	<i>\$877.46</i>	<i>\$585.00</i>	<i>\$292.19</i>	<i>1040</i>	<i>909</i>	<i>143</i>	<i>\$0.97</i>	<i>\$138.04</i>
<i>Dec</i>	<i>\$877.46</i>	<i>\$585.00</i>	<i>\$292.19</i>	<i>1057</i>	<i>909</i>	<i>143</i>	<i>\$0.97</i>	<i>\$138.04</i>
Totals	\$9,030.88	\$6,020.89	\$3,007.28					\$1,366.57

The “opt out” program – where a member voluntarily eschews receiving the mailed, printed newsletter – saves the LMSC significantly. We began the program last April; there were 102 opt-outs by Oct and the estimated annual savings was \$500. Last year's opt-outs were carried over to this year, assuming they renewed their registration (17 didn't). At present we have 143 opt outs, 13.6% of our total membership, for an estimated annual savings of \$1350. If two members share a last name and mailing address, only one copy of the newsletter is sent to the address; 30 of the 143 opt-outs are of this type; in other words, 113 members have voluntarily opted out.

Some ideas to reduce newsletter costs further:

- **Advertise the opt-out program more aggressively**, perhaps in the printed newsletter, not just electronically.
- **Reduce newsletter size**. Possible examples:
 - Some articles may be better off posted only on the LMSC website; an example might be top ten lists, which can take a significant amount of print area.
 - The length of meet/race entry information needs to be strictly limited.
 - Some articles could be published in the newsletter in abbreviated format, with a complete version posted on the web.
- **Reduce the mailing list**. Perhaps we mail only to LMSC members who reside within the LMSC boundaries and “forcibly” place the others on the opt-out list.

These are just suggestions, of course; we don't have to do any of them, though the consequence of that would be the need to increase the LMSC fee further. Good communications engage our membership, increasing participation; even in this age of electronic communications, many still prefer to read about their favorite pastime on paper while sitting at the table and sipping coffee. Whatever we do, we need to be careful we do not damage communication lines overmuch in the quest to pinch pennies.

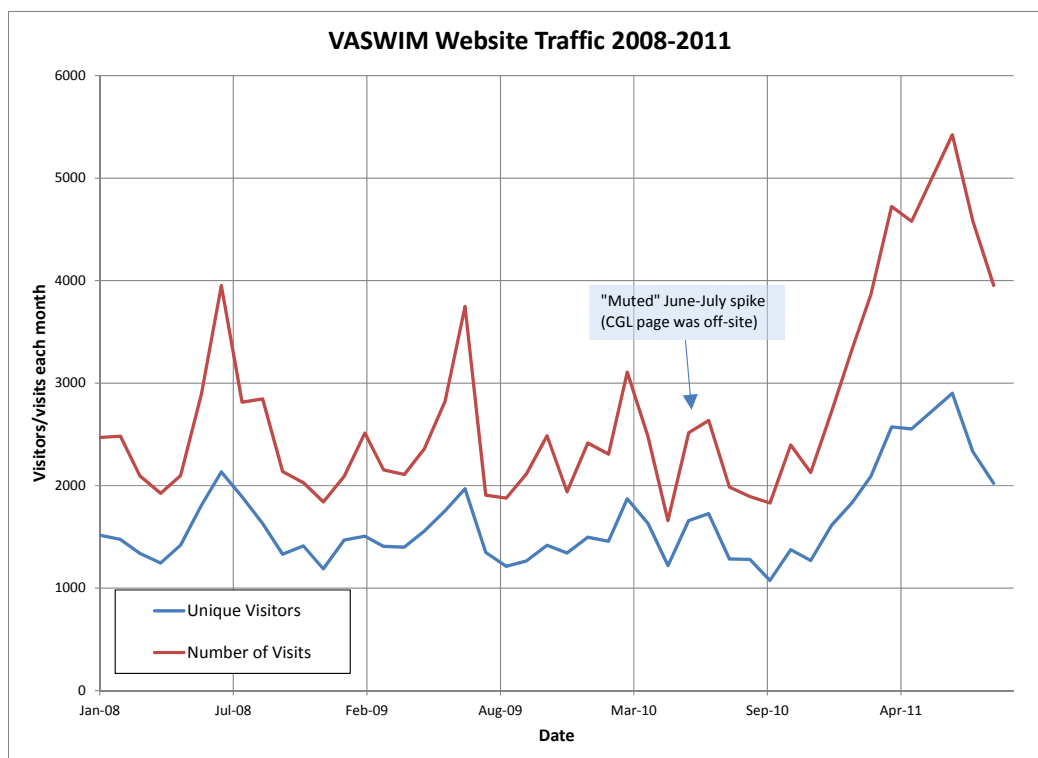
LMSC Website

The LMSC website (www.vaswim.org) was completely redesigned last December and launched in January. The new website uses the WordPress platform. Almost all the information that was on the old website is included, with many additions and modifications. The Chris Greene Lake (CGL) portion of the website was brought “back into the family,” so to speak, after a year in which race director Dave Holland maintained it independently and separately from the LMSC website; it too now resides on the WordPress platform. The only portion of the old website that has not been ported is the Ratings Calculator, which requires a little more work. It is still accessible as part of the old website; all other links to the old website are automatically redirected to the corresponding portion of the new site.

Feedback on the website redesign has been overwhelmingly positive, typically about the more professional look of the website, the ease of navigation, the content, and the speed with which items were added/updated. Jim Matysek, USMS webmaster/IT director, recently gave a workshop at the USMS Convention that included the principles of good LMSC website design. All of the features identified had already been incorporated into our website.

One negative comment was about the website title, “Virginia Masters Swimming,” since it is easy to confuse it with VMST. The title of the old website was “LMSC of Virginia.” A major problem with the old title, in my opinion, is that the meaning of the acronym “LMSC” is not obvious to a visitor who is not already a masters swimmer; in fact, it may well be that a fair number of USMS members don’t really know the significance. It is also not a title that is very friendly to search engines; the single most commonly used search phrase that lands visitors on the site is “Virginia masters swimming” or variations thereof.

The following figure shows website traffic over the last three years; clearly the number of visits and visitors has grown since the new website was launched. The number of visits increases greatly every year in June and July in conjunction with the Jack King and Chris Greene OW swims.



Last year there were an average of 77 visits/day in Jan-Sept; so far this year the average is 121 visits/day over the same time frame, an increase in traffic of 58% (statistics collected by AWStats). About 80% of visitors came from a direct link in a bookmark, email, or typing the URL in the browser; 10% came from an internet search on Google, Yahoo or the like; and 10% came from external links, most commonly from the USMS website.

The website consists of a mix of mostly-static pages and news items; the latter are posted approximately every 3-4 days. Visits to the static pages are broken down in the next table. The statistics were provided by the WordPress site stats plugin, which gives counts higher than AWStats; for example, according to the WP plug-in, we averaged 175 visits/day in 2011, higher than the 120 value reported by AWStats.

Page	Views	News Item	Views
Home Page	16,518	Open Water at Nationals	1,840
CGL Home	5,946	First-Ever Positive Drug Test for Masters Swimmer	989
Upcoming Events	4,735	Dryland Training: Training for Power	319
Meet Results	2,997	Date Set for 2011 Jack King Ocean swim	294
Clubs	2,079	Dryland Training for Swimmers: Training the Core	288
LMSC Records	1,159	Chris Greene Cable Swim Registration is Open	207
CGL Photos	831	David Gregg Results	185
About CGL	574	Peluso Open Water Race Series	175
About the LMSC	512	Short-Course Meters World Rankings	173
The Wet Gazette	499	Jack King Ocean Swim Entry Form	152
Photos	451	Jack King Results	112
CGL Top Swimmers	432	Chris Greene Psych Sheets	111
CGL History	377	David Gregg Announcement	107
Mythical Nat'l Champs	366	Freestyle Clinic in Virginia Beach	105
Top Ten	347	Great Chesapeake Bay Swim Results	104
LMSC Officers	343	2011 USMS Summer Nationals Highlights	103
CGL Winners by Year	341	Mighty Mermaid	94
CGL Course Survey	287	Tropical Splash Meet Results	93
CGL Records	267	What's for Dinner?	86
CGL Directions	238	USMS Annual Convention	84

It is clear that the Chris Greene Lake pages are popular, as are the usual suspects (calendar of events, meet results). Among the news items, OW announcements/results are popular.

Future work on the website:

- Incorporating the rating calculator into the new website. On the old website, it was 3rd most popular page, behind Upcoming Events and ahead of Meet Results. It is undoubtedly still attracting hits, but the WP counter doesn't see those. Chris has a number of ideas to improve upon the old calculator when he finds the time to move it over (this involves some PHP programming, a language Chris hasn't used yet).
- Adding sharing/networking tools to news item posts, allowing visitors to add a link to the item on Facebook, etc. There are a number of WordPress plugins that do this, Chris just needs to evaluate which is the most appropriate for our site.
- Adding a Jack King portion of the site, similar to the CGL portion. OW is popular, and Jack King has a history almost as rich as CGL. Setting up the structure of the site wouldn't be the problem – Chris did the CGL site in just a few days – but Chris needs others to contribute most of the content: description of history, past results, photos, etc, like Dave Holland did with the CGL site.

In June, Chris created a Facebook page for the Virginia LMSC and set it up so that news items posted on the website were mirrored on the FB page. There are currently 80 "likes" of the page, meaning that new posts will appear in their FB feed. Anyone can also follow the FB via RSS feed. The idea is to increase the LMSC's visibility, since many of the people who follow the FB page are not members.

Chris Greene has a Facebook Group that was set up about 18 months ago. A FB group is a little different than a FB page in that one must either be invited or apply to become a member of the group. There are currently 97 members of the group, mostly participants in the CGL races. That group is significantly more (inter-)active than the LMSC FB page; a number of group members ask questions or discuss the race in the months leading up to it.

Monthly Email Digests

We use *iContact* (www.icontact.com) to send a monthly email to our membership. Surveys are also possible, though we did not do any this year. The email consists largely of a collection of the “What’s New” items that were posted to the website (and also on the Facebook page); some items that were time-sensitive are deleted, while others (eg results or event announcements) are combined and streamlined. The monthly email digests are archived on the website, as are “What’s New” news items. The latter are searchable and filterable by date and category.

As a method of email distribution, *iContact* has served well. Our size puts us at a good price point. There are two disadvantages, though:

- They use the email address as the “key field” in their database. That means if someone changes their email address and Chris adds them to the LMSC contacts, that person will show up as two people. Best case: it results in bounces, no big deal. Worst case: someone had unsubscribed using their previous email address; they change it with USMS, and become subscribed again. So Chris has to do extra work to watch out for this.
- If someone wishes to manage their account, they HAVE to keep one of the emails that were sent to them and access it through the link provided. They cannot manage it online, even if they call customer support. If someone accidentally unsubscribed but didn’t save their emails, they are out of luck: they cannot get back onto the list unless they change their email address. (This has happened.)

As directed by the LMSC Board, emails in Jan-Mar went out to both 2010 and 2011 members. In March, a separate email was sent to 2010 members who had not renewed, warning them that this would be the last direct communication from the LMSC; from April, emails were only sent to 2011 members.

Date Sent	Members	Recipients	Opens	Clicks	Bounces	Unsubscribes
11/3/2010	1102	1345	29.1%	10.1%	1.5%	0.3%
12/7/2010	1102	1344	27.2%	10.8%	1.5%	0.3%
1/11/2011	534	1087	37.7%	20.2%	1.1%	0.2%
2/5/2011	692	1103	35.9%	19.9%	1.5%	0.5%
3/7/2011	783	1140	33.3%	17.4%	1.6%	0.2%
4/7/2011	845	741	30.8%	16.1%	2.8%	0.1%
5/10/2011	877	767	39.8%	18.1%	1.7%	0.4%
6/9/2011	919	804	36.8%	18.4%	1.5%	0.0%
7/1/2011	990	870	42.0%	23.1%	2.5%	0.2%
8/1/2011	1017	891	40.7%	21.0%	1.9%	0.2%
9/2/2011	1025	890	40.3%	20.5%	0.8%	0.1%
10/9/2011	1040	903	38.8%	18.6%	0.8%	0.2%

The table above shows the results of the monthly messages sent out since the last annual LMSC meeting. Since April – when we switched to current-year members – an average of 38.5% of the recipients (or 325 members) opened their monthly email while about half that (19.5%, or 163 people) clicked on one or more links.

The second set of numbers – roughly 160 people – is significant because it represents the people who “interact” the most with their electronic email newsletter. There are currently 113 people who have volunteered to read the electronic

(PDF) version of *The Wet Gazette*. If, through aggressive advertising, we push this number much above 160 people, there is a good chance that we will be losing readers in our effort to cut costs.