

Virginia LMSC Communications

Annual Report 2012

Submitted by Betsy Durrant (newsletter editor) and Chris Stevenson (webmaster/electronic communications), Oct 2012

Effective communication runs two ways (eg, both top-down and bottom-up) and on multiple levels (eg, between Board members and among LMSC members).

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 mailing address, only one copy of the newsletter is sent.
- **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 current version of the website, which uses the WordPress platform, launched in January 2011; only minor tweaks to formatting were made this year. Besides containing a number of mostly static informational pages, usually 8-10 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 10 subscribers to receive email alerts.
- The Virginia LMSC has a **Virginia Masters Swimming Facebook page**; webpage news items are also posted there. The page currently has 160 “likes” (followers), double the 80 followers from last year. There is a **Chris Greene Lake Cable Swim Facebook group**, currently with 127 members, 30 more than last year. 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 776 photos in 33 sets; 378 photos (10 sets) were uploaded in the past year.

The newsletter, monthly emails and website function very well for top-down communication; opportunities for bottom-up communication are a little more limited, but the LMSC Board members and club representatives are all prominently listed on the website with email addresses, and there is a separate contact page for LMSC officers that is used by visitors to the website. Communications among LMSC board members usually takes place by email and conference calls (there were two virtual meetings in 2012). Communications between members can occur on the two Facebook pages, and of course at events such as meets.

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 the Registrar 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.

The “opt out” program – where a member voluntarily eschews receiving the mailed, printed newsletter – saves the LMSC a significant amount of money. Betsy includes a prominent box item encouraging people to read the newsletter electronically and giving instructions on doing so.

Chris now maintains the latest version of the printed newsletter at the following (stable) URL, which we can encourage members to bookmark so that they can read it electronically every month:

<http://www.vaswim.org/newsletters/Current.pdf>

Betsy maintains a list of about 20 people outside our LMSC who receive the newsletter. She emails them the color copy.

At this time (Oct 2012) there are 167 opt-outs (14.9% of our membership), which is up from last year (143, 13.6%); for 2012 this will save us from sending almost 1700 newsletters, which have averaged about \$1/paper to send. Note that if two members share a last name and mailing address, only one copy of the newsletter is sent to the address; 46 of the 167 opt-outs are of this type; in other words, 121 current members have voluntarily opted out.

At our last conference call, the LMSC Board discussed some ways to reduced newsletter costs:

- **Advertise the opt-out program more aggressively.** We now include items in both the monthly electronic email (see below) and in the printed newsletter. Shirley said that we can also push this during online registration, and this is something to consider if it is worded properly.
- **Reduce newsletter size.** Betsy is doing her best to keep the size down to 8 pages every month. One way to do that is to not include mail entry forms any longer for events that have online registration. We don't want to “disenfranchise” swimmers who prefer to mail in their entries, so we could provide a link to the PDF form that can be printed or (for members who are not proficient or don't have access to computers) the phone number of the meet director who can mail a form to the swimmer.
- **Reduce the mailing list.** Perhaps we should mail only to LMSC members who reside within the LMSC boundaries and “forcibly” place the others on the opt-out list. If we do this, in our opinion it should be a motion that is approved by the Board.

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 in the quest to pinch pennies.*

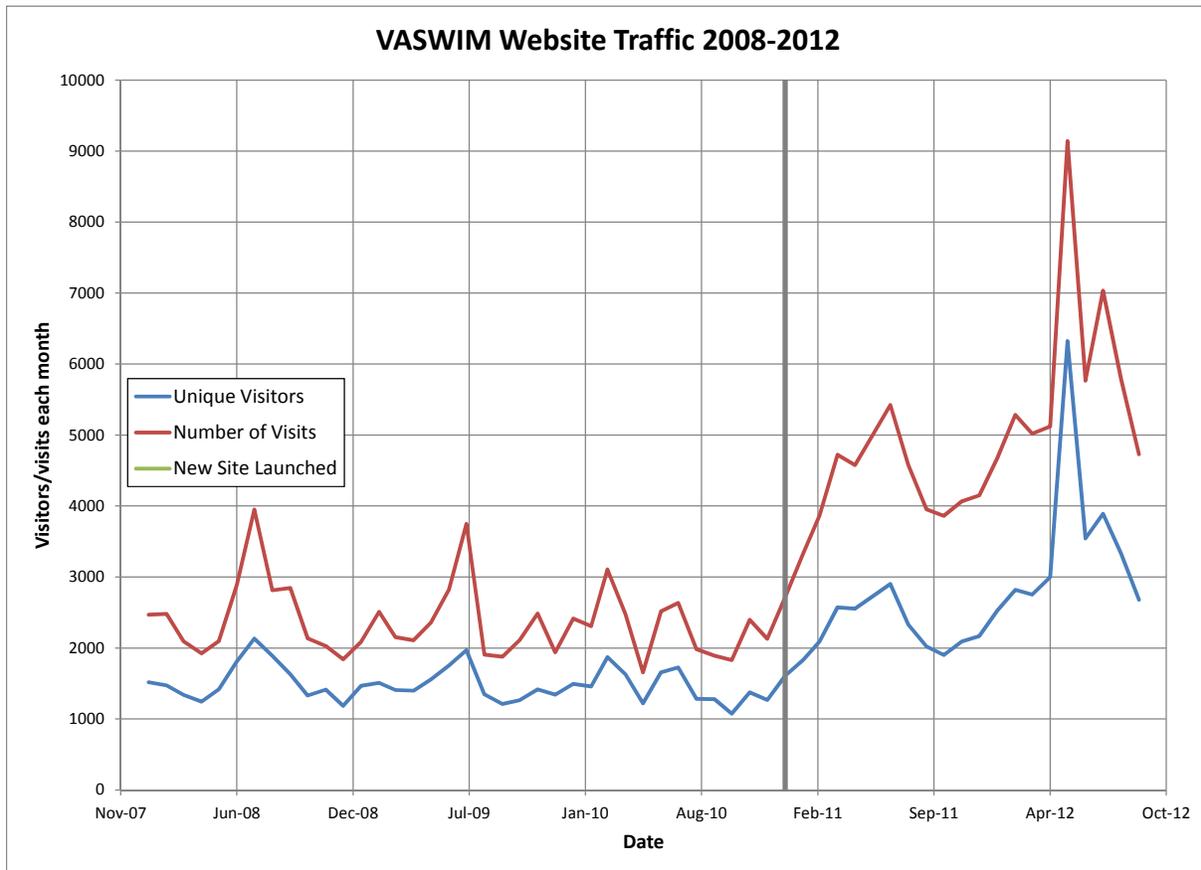
LMSC Website

Jim Matysek, USMS webmaster/IT director, recently gave a workshop at the USMS Convention that included the principles of good LMSC website design. Most of the features he identified have been incorporated into our website. He did mention that about 20% of traffic to the USMS website is due to mobile devices (tablets and smartphones). While tablet display of our website works fine, there is too much detail on our home page to be viewed all at one on a smartphone; arguably there is too much detail even for a full size computer screen. **I will be looking into ways to create**

an alternative, simplified version of our website for mobile devices (even USMS doesn't do this now, although there are plans to do so).

Jim also mentioned that we should try looking at our websites with Javascript turned off in the browser, because this happens when people choose the highest security settings in Internet Explorer. Our website still does fine, though a few minor features get lost (eg, the photos from the Flickr site are no longer displayed on the home page).

The following figure shows website traffic over the last four 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.



Visits to the site have continued to grow this year: visits/visitors are up 34% compared to last year, which itself was a substantial improvement over the previous years. The time series suggests that over the past two years we have more than doubled the reach of our website.

The table on the next page shows the top 20 pages by views over the past 12 months; the items in italics are news item posts while the others are more static web pages like Upcoming Events or Meet Results.

As mentioned previously, Chris will look into ways to optimize the website display for smartphones (not a trivial task).

Other plans in the coming years:

- Incorporate upcoming events, photos and results into a web-based database that can be queried and displayed in a variety of manners.
- Ditto for LMSC records and FINA Top 10 performances.
- Incorporating the rating calculator into the main (WordPress) site and expanding upon it.

Any suggestions for improving the website are welcome.

Page	Views
Home page / Archives	23444
Upcoming Events	8478
<i>Marie Kelleher Breaks Barrier</i>	6419
Chris Greene Lake Cable Swim	6017
Meet Results	3936
Clubs	3270
Open Water at Nationals	1789
LMSC Records	1463
<i>Dryland Training: Training for Power</i>	899
About	789
The Wet Gazette	702
Photos	665
<i>VMST Member Bill Winters, age 44, Qualifies for Olympic Trials</i>	619
<i>Dryland Training for Swimmers: Training the Core</i>	598
<i>First-Ever Positive Drug Test for Masters Swimmer</i>	541
Forms	518
LMSC Officers	476
Chris Greene Lake Cable Swim History	470
<i>Breaststroke Underwater Dolphin Kick</i>	464
Chris Greene Lake Photos	439

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 2011 and 2012 members. In March, a separate email was sent to 2011 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 2012 members.

Over the past 12 months, an average of 40% of the recipients (or 370 members) opened their monthly email while about half that (18.7%, or 173 people) clicked on one or more links. Both sets of numbers are higher than last year over the same time period. The second set of numbers – roughly 170 people – is significant because it represents the people who “interact” the most with their electronic email newsletter. There are currently 121 people who have volunteered to read the electronic (PDF) version of *The Wet Gazette*. If, through aggressive advertising, we push this number much above 170 people, there is a good chance that we will be losing readers in our effort to cut costs.