



National Association of State Boating Law Administrators Engineering, Reporting & Analysis Committee

Expanding the conversation on boating accident data and issues: *An exploration of three key NASBLA social media platform options for developing an online forum*

THE CHARGE 2012 B-2

Complete development of an online forum that expands and facilitates discussions about recreational boating accident analysis and data issues, resolutions, and applications with other governmental, academic and non-profit researchers and data users.

BACKGROUND

As a NASBLA committee, ERAC – as well as its predecessor groups – has been a focal point for NASBLA members to gather to discuss recreational boating accident issues, conduct analyses on and actively work to improve the quality of accident and related data, and produce reports and tools intended to improve the understanding of accident factors and trends. The intent of this charge is to more widely share ERAC products and resources and expand the committee’s own knowledge base by widening the circle of participants in its discussions on accident issues, data, and research findings. As the assigned charge team recognized early on in the cycle, however, foundational work has to occur before an effective and accessible virtual forum can be built. This report describes the related efforts undertaken in the 2012 committee cycle, and outlines the recommendations for moving forward in the next cycle.

THE APPROACH

NASBLA currently has three web-based platforms to facilitate ongoing projects, peer connections, and national exposure. All three platforms have components that assist NASBLA in its overall goals. However, it is important for ERAC to identify the most suitable platform for developing the online forum described in this charge, as well as meet other specific committee needs and goals.

With this in mind, the ERAC team assigned to this charge took the following approach:

- Defined the functional requirements for an online forum;
- Created a shortlist of platform options for an online forum based on these requirements;
- Evaluated the shortlist of platform options;
- Identified the best match for the committee’s unique circumstances;
- Identified initial content to be uploaded.

THE EVALUATION

During the 2012 committee cycle, the charge team identified three functional requirements for an online forum – ease of access; broad viewership; and ease of use – and evaluated not only the three web-based platforms currently used by NASBLA, but also alternative software suites available on the open market.

On that basis, the team identified the shortlist of platforms that would be further evaluated:

- NASBLA’s website software provider i4a - used for the organization’s public and member-only web pages, event registration, and other association management functions, and which has built-in discussion forum functionality.
- NASBLA’s separate project management software provider Basecamp - a collaboration software suite with some additional features, used primarily by NASBLA committees for committee-specific activities such as announcing meetings and conference calls, messaging/commenting, and housing internal work files and documents.
- NASBLA’s social media software provider Higher Logic – which has taken the form of NASBLA’s “Connected Community” - a collaboration and social forum software suite that includes messaging, document libraries, blogs, and other “Facebook” or “LinkedIn” like features.

Since NASBLA already uses these platforms – in some cases, for overlapping purposes -- and given the additional cost of using another package outside of these three, the evaluation was limited to these existing platforms.

In its evaluation of each platform, the charge team focused on three features – ease of access, views, and ease of use:

➤ ***How is the platform accessed and how easy is it to access?***

- Currently, in order to access Basecamp, NASBLA’s Connected Community, or particular other features of the i4a platform (e.g., member-only sections, event registration areas, and Discussion Forums), a person must already be in the NASBLA system by virtue of past participation in organizational activities or must request access through the NASBLA office (or NASBLA staff administrators in the case of Basecamp) before they can become a part of the discussion. However, the member login for the features of the i4a platform and for the Connected Community is the same; the login for Basecamp is distinct.
- Preferred option: The common login information for both the overall i4a functions and the Connected Community is a plus. However, for purposes of the online forum, the i4a software, with its built-in Discussion Forum feature, is the preferred option in this case. Its Forum feature requests minimal information to join a specific forum and forum discussions – through the use of messaging threads -- can be given different security levels based on the need to restrict and moderate comments or to allow more open discussions.

➤ ***How is the platform viewed and how often is it estimated to be viewed?***

- Currently, information put on either i4a or the Connected Community can be found through searches on most popular search engines. Information on Basecamp, however, is restricted to

those people who have access to a specific project area and is not searchable. If the intention is to engage other data users in discussions, then this ultimately makes Basecamp a non-viable option.

- Preferred option: The i4a platform is believed to be the most viewed and searchable of the platform options.

➤ ***How easy is the platform to use?***

- Ease of use is a key feature for any organization with the demographic diversity of NASBLA and its partnering organizations. Even for seasoned computer users, Basecamp can present challenges in locating and uploading data files, as well as providing notifications of postings to other users. The Connected Community is somewhat more self-explanatory, however navigating and understanding the user/group roles and functions can also be challenging.
- Preferred option: Overall, the i4a platform, with its Discussion Forum feature, seems to be the most user-friendly option based on the ability for those setting up the forum to “guide” the users through additional posted information and on its similarity to other online forums.

RECOMMENDATIONS-- Platform and Content

Platform recommendation: The existing i4a platform was identified as the best option to begin to build the forum intended to expand and facilitate discussions about recreational boating accident analysis and data issues, resolutions, and applications with other governmental, academic, and non-profit researchers and data users. Several key factors favor the i4a platform:

- The most easily-accessed forum option, with security level qualifications for content as needed;
- Reaches the widest audience, with accessibility to those persons outside of the traditional membership of the organization;
- The most user-friendly interface for forum participants.

Content recommendations: In addition to recommending the i4a software for the forum’s platform, the ERAC charge team further recommends that the following content be included on the forum site at its inception:

- Reference materials related to accident reporting (all dated upon upload to maintain historical record and relevance)
 - Materials that would serve as a common reference point for discussions at the national level, such as:
 - COMDINST M16761 (Commandant’s Instructions on Accident Reporting) – a U.S. Coast Guard document outlining pertinent details and guidance regarding recreational boating accident investigation and reporting
 - Lists of accident report terms and definitions as developed and approved for use
 - Ready-reference materials for those entering the accident reporting realm, including new hires (e.g., officers/investigators, report reviewers, data entry personnel) or those

seeking to complete research in the area of recreational boating accidents (e.g., college students, interns, etc.)

- Hands-on research and analysis materials
 - A “one-stop shop” for tools and a point of contact for sharing findings. As ERAC continues to develop research and analysis tools for use by the states (e.g., *Template for In-depth Analysis of Fatality Trends by Body of Water*), this forum should be a place to obtain the tools (e.g., spreadsheets, templates, etc.) to complete analyses, and to share findings for additional discussion at the national level
- Discussion forums related to a variety of committee and user-identified, timely accident-reporting issues and research

Standing charge recommendation: As with any forum or online resource, oversight and update of the forum contents will be critical to its effectiveness and ability to provide resources to those that want and need to use those contents. With this in mind, the 2012 charge team also recommends a standing charge be for ERAC to annually appoint a “keeper” for the forum -- responsible for monitoring and updating content, and for researching additional relevant content for inclusion.