

# The Pier Aquarium: nonprofit online community success

## CASE STUDIES



The Pier Aquarium is a private, not-for-profit aquarium and marine education science center located in downtown St. Petersburg, Fla. at The Pier on the waterfront. Their mission is to enhance the public's understanding of the value and fragility of the local and global marine environment through research, education and personal experiences.

The Pier Aquarium has received multiple recognitions for its work in ocean science and marine life education, including being named a finalist in the Tampa Bay Business Journal's Nonprofit of the Year Award in the environment and animals category; as well as a nominee for the National Medal for Museum and Library Science. Their work has garnered much

respect as they have won a Florida Inclusive Culture Award for Best Practices in Access from the State of Florida Division of Cultural Affairs and VSA Arts of Florida; the Mayor's Top Apple Award in partnership with Campbell Park Elementary; an Award of Excellence in Water Conservation Education from the Southwest Florida Water Management District; and the Gulf Guardian Award from the United States Protection Agency.

### Educating the World about Your Mission (and your organization)

The number one challenge facing most nonprofits is educating the community – be it local or international – about its mission. Without publicizing the message and mission, donors will not contribute money, volunteers will not be drawn to supporting the cause, and the good work being done will come to a halt.

The Pier Aquarium faced this same struggle. When they began their work to educate the public on the necessity and vulnerability of aquatic life and how it ties into the livelihood and enjoyment of this area, they realized not only were they bringing attention to this important matter but they had to bring attention to the fact that they were bringing attention. There was no website, no online presence, no social media activity (or even plan in place).

### Getting Your Message Online

The Pier Aquarium partnered with YourMembership.com to create a website that would give them not only an impressive online presence and content management system, but also provided additional features such as event registration and dues collection. They have been so satisfied with the system that, five years later, all event registration takes place online.

### Facebook Events vs. Private Online Community Registration

One of the aspects that The Pier Aquarium likes about YourMembership.com's software is the two-way communication it fosters. They found that when using Facebook for events, there was little accountability with the one-way dissemination of information. When they used the events feature with YourMembership.com for registering attendees, they not only captured their contact information (and could use it for future event invitations), but also invitees and registrants felt more a part of the events.

The Pier Aquarium was pleasantly surprised at how they even received regrets from those unable to attend these free events. They were building community and the invitees felt like they were receiving a personal request for their presence instead of a social media cattle call. Plus, for those attendees who registered multiple people, The Pier Aquarium was able to thank them personally at the sign-in table. This referral information would've been lost in a large public social networking platform.

A private member website allowed them to personalize their approach and win supporters. The Pier Aquarium knows that constituents are stretched for money and time and that they are competing with other nonprofits for resources.

With their social media efforts (including the easy upload of press releases as well as incorporating their Facebook and Twitter feeds on their website) they are able to reach a broader audience in a more directed (and effective) way. Their public social media profiles also drive traffic to their website and build interest in their community, while allowing them to capture and harness the constituent data.

### Software that Grows with You

Even though The Pier Aquarium is seeing great success with its member community and features, they know there's more to be done.

They have many ideas on how to continue the growth and YourMembership.com is the perfect partner for this kind of forward thinking as features can be toggled on or off as their needs change or they develop new ways to engage their constituents.

The Pier Aquarium admits that they have only **"scratched the surface of what YourMembership.com has to offer."** An important part of social media is keeping your offerings fresh and content updated on a regular basis. The Pier Aquarium updates their content frequently and finds the tools easy to work with and the support helpful and patient.

Constituents have been "positive about the website" and The Pier Aquarium looks forward to continued growth and expanding its offerings to its constituents through the YourMembership.com platform.