

Developing a Sports Nutrition Website: An Interview With Michelle Minehan

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In February 2001, the Department of Sports Nutrition at the Australian Institute of Sport launched its website <www.ais.org.au/nutrition>. In part, this was a response to an Australian Government directive that federally-funded organizations must be able to conduct their business “on-line.” However, the Department of Sports Nutrition decided to seize the opportunity to achieve its own goals:

- To promote the value of nutrition in the enjoyment and achievement of optimal performance in sport and exercise activities.
- To publicize the work of the AIS Department of Sports Nutrition, its range of services and policies, and special achievements and expertise.
- To provide state-of-the-art education resources and information on sports nutrition for members of the athletic and general communities.
- To explore commercial opportunities through E-commerce of education resources and potential sponsorships of parts of the website.
- To explore the potential for the on-line delivery of sports nutrition education and other department activities.
- To create partnerships and links between agencies and organizations with similar goals.

Each of these goals was important to the core business of our Department. In particular we considered the initial investment in the website as a means to become more efficient and effective with some of our activities. For example, the continuing recognition of the AIS and the advent of email has made us a common target for community requests for nutrition advice and personalized eating plans, supplement discussions, resources for school and college assignments, and assistance with undertaking sports nutrition research. It is a time-intensive and repetitious task to reply to each request—even to say no! More importantly, we felt that the information provided to athletes, coaches, and the general community needed to look more professional and be more immediate in order to compete against the marketing hype generated by the supplement industry and popular dietary programs.

The website is a result of a reorganization of our department priorities and involves the brainstorming and input of the 5 sports dietitians in our department. However, the day-to-day management is overseen by one dietitian, Michelle Minehan, who then delegates the needed tasks among the rest of the staff. In this interview, Michelle shares the experience of developing and maintaining a public website.

How did you get started? What was required to launch the website?

We were part of the launch of the AIS Corporate website. This had advantages in that we didn't have to invest in elaborate web design of our own; in fact we were obliged to use the design and themes developed for the whole AIS Corporate website. We set out to develop a unique website that fits within the AIS site and its goals. However,

we had to contend with some restrictions; for example, we had to sit within the AIS site instead of registering our own catchy web address. And the Government has an Equal Access code, which means the web contents have to be accessible to people with impaired sight or with under-powered computers. So we can't have some of the "bells and whistles" in web design that make some sites look cool. We also have to follow the official AIS protocol for preparing website material—everything has to be checked off by various departments to ensure that it conforms to standards of quality and format, and fits within our Intellectual Property guidelines. While this does provide us a safety net and clear plan for how to do things, it also means that we have to schedule in sufficient time for our material to pass through all the checks and balances before it "goes live."

How did you decide about the contents of the website and how did you know when it was time to "go live"?

We used a number of philosophies to guide us in planning the website. First, we worked to clearly define the goals of our site, which then made it easier to identify the different segments that the site needed to contain. Second, we examined the resources and information we already owned to see how much of this could be transferred to the Internet. This step had a cross-benefit—we could use the website to publicize our existing resources, and in turn it provided some immediate content for the site. For example, we were able to get permission from friendly book publishers to upload material we had written for them, in part or in whole, on our site. So our site contains chapters or excerpts from textbooks and laybooks, as well as recipes from our best-selling cookbook (and an opportunity to order the full publications on-line using E-commerce). We also collected the abstracts of our research publications, with a link to the AIS Information Centre service, which allows someone to make an inter-library loan request on-line. This is an efficient use of existing material.

Third, we recognized the value of repeat business, especially to make the site attractive to a sponsor. We developed an infrastructure, which included sections that would be regularly expanded with a program of new material—a new recipe each week and two new fact sheets each month. Not only did this mean that people will keep coming back to our site, but it allowed us to launch without having to have all the final material completed. Our site is intended to be a work in progress! Finally, we thought about the ways in which we could collapse repetitive Department tasks into a more efficient activity—for example, to post pro-active material about Department policies, programs, and routine activities such as student placements. We identified that replying to ad hoc requests for information is an inefficient use of our time resources. We thought that we could divert unsolicited email (and phone) queries by developing fact sheets on "frequently asked questions" in sports nutrition, and by providing a streamlined "Q&A" service. These last activities were identified as services that might attract sponsors—and in fact, we were able to get support from food companies for these parts of the site.

The overview of our site is as follows:

- Resources: books, videos, and resources developed or used at the AIS.
- Research: studies and publications from AIS Sports Nutrition.
- Hot topics: fact sheets on different topics in sports nutrition.
- Fuelling your sport: fact sheets on sports nutrition for specific sports and exercise activities.
- Supplements: handy education about supplements including the AIS Sports Supplements program.

- Q&A page: Do you have a sports nutrition question? Then ask us.
- More about us: Who are we? What do we do? Our partners, how to become a sports dietitian, and hotlinks.
- Special attention to “what’s new,” “recipe of the week,” and “gold medal value” (full length articles and publications).

What is the ongoing commitment to maintain the website and how do you manage this?

We outsourced the uploading of our start-up content to an IT specialist. Our Web guru developed templates for the various components of the site and continues to act as its general Webmaster. However, she taught us the basic skills of HTML so that we can manage many of the ongoing tasks such as our commitment to adding new fact sheets and recipes. The preparation of new material and the servicing of the Q&A page is shared among the Department members, with each dietitian committing about 5–10 hours a month to various projects. My time commitment is about 15 hours per week.

How does the Q&A site work? Is it cumbersome to answer the requests, and how do you try to prevent it from being abused—for example, to be used by students to provide easy answers to their school assignments?

Visitors to the site are offered the opportunity to “ask a sports dietitian” their burning questions. Providing such a service is definitely risky! There are plenty of crank emails and school assignments that are often thinly disguised. It has been a steep learning curve to recognize these. We average about 50 questions each month, with the most frequent requests (in order) coming from students, people wanting personal eating plans, queries about supplements, sports specific questions from coaches and athletes, and finally questions from other professionals such as doctors and dietitians. We have a disclaimer on this page saying that we can’t provide personalized eating plans or specific clinical advice. Instead, we refer people to seek the individualized services of a sports dietitian. And we suggest that student assignments require a better research plan. Of course, readers are asked to read through the archive of previous Q&A topics or our existing fact sheets before we prepare a new response. This service is definitely time consuming, but it does keep us in touch with the topics of interest and helps us to plan new fact sheets.

How well is the site working after 6 months of operation? How can you evaluate the way that it is used?

According to the general AIS Webmaster, the AIS Nutrition site is the most successful site on the AIS Corporate Website, accounting for almost 30% of total traffic to the AIS site. Visitors have slowly increased over the months, with traffic averaging 6,500 hits per week in June to 10,500 hits per week in September. According to the web record, visitors looked at an average of 4 pages per visit, showing that they were interested to explore the content. The most popular pages (in order) were the two lots of fact sheets (“Fuelling Your Sport,” “Hot Topics”), research, supplements, and recipes. Most of the traffic (60%) appears to come from a “.com” (primarily U.S. but not limited to U.S.-based sites), with 10% coming from Australia, 2–3% from the UK, and another 13% from unidentified sources.

We are looking forward to doing a full evaluation after 12 months of operation, but so far, the rewards and feedback for our investment have been very pleasing.