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Local Website Hits #1

Volunteer-driven Chocolate Festival #1 on the Web.

Coquitlam: Sometimes the little ones finish first. When a non-profit organization is staffed by volunteers, its plans take extra time to be realized. When that non-profit has big plans to compete in the international market, success is a long shot.

For the West Coast Chocolate Festival, based in the Coquitlam, Port Moody and Port Coquitlam area of BC's Lower Mainland, the long shot has hit the bull's-eye.

The bilingual festival's website is ranked #1 by Google, Yahoo, MSN, and AOL search engines, when searching for 'chocolate festival' or 'festival du chocolat'. This milestone was achieved by a small group of volunteers without any provincial or federal funding, relying on corporate sponsorships and ticket sales for revenue.

"We're thrilled! We figure we must be number one for most of the western world", said festival coordinator Linda Baker, who in 2001 envisioned the weeklong festival to be a fundraiser for youth arts and a destination tourism event for the host region. "We know our audience uses the Internet, so we had to have a good presence."

The two web addresses - www.chocolatefestival.ca and www.festivalduchocolat.ca - both default to a single bilingual website. Since millions of expensive websites are vying for attention, employing elaborate schemes to be ranked number one by search engines, how does a local site costing less than \$3,000 make it to the top in less than three years?

"The West Coast Chocolate Festival is such an obvious magnet for tourism, culinary, and event-related websites, that we were welcomed with open arms," said Lori Bodin, the volunteer webmaster who updates the site. "This allowed us to achieve our dual goals of publicizing the festival and optimizing our search engine ranking. The payoff is in steadily increasing festival attendance, bus tour company inquiries, and more exposure for our sponsors."

A study of past-year website stats provided by host Effigy Interactive reveals 2.4 million hits from the U.S., the Netherlands, France, China, Brazil and other countries, including the remote Cocos Islands.

"We get frequent e-mails asking for advice on how to organize a chocolate festival," noted Baker, "from places like California, Georgia, Saskatchewan, and North Carolina. Last year a group of Masters Business students from Australia requested detailed information as part of a research project".

In 2004, more than 60% of festival attendees came from outside the host region to attend events like Chocolate Spa Night, Chocolate, Port and More, and All Things Chocolate. One couple flew from California expressly for the festival, people traveled from the Okanagan and Vancouver Island, and visitors from Washington State come each year.

"Everyone loves chocolate," says Baker. "It's magic! We position the festival 'for the senses and the soul', focusing on celebrating *chocolate and all that it inspires*. This brings in the arts, appreciation, and passion, and appeals to our target demographic of women 25-54 while also engaging men, families - everybody, really."

The festival is currently doing minor upgrades to the website, and Bodin's volunteer time will keep it maintained. 'It's all about the vision, the creativity, and of course determination and lots of work,' says Baker, 'but clearly anything is possible when you see the cup half full, specially if it's chocolate!'

The 2005 West Coast Chocolate Festival takes place October 15-22 in Coquitlam, Port Moody and Port Coquitlam. www.chocolatefestival.ca www.festivalduchocolat.ca

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For further information:

Linda Baker
Festival Coordinator
604-939-8068

Alan Flowers
Marketing Coordinator
604-523-0914