

Websites

Introduction

The web aims to make information available, freely and in forms that are easily accessible ('click and go' information; multimedia options for accessing information and/or the option of collecting and/or providing feedback). The array of computer software and graphics packages and the capacity of the web as a publicity tool, information source and forum for public input or electronic democracy is expanding, increasing the application of this participatory tool. Websites are particularly useful for people in remote areas accessing project information and are more effective than information repositories in this regard. As well, websites make ideal community notice boards for small organisations and provide sources for interaction when they invite feedback and provide email addresses or chat options. They are readily updateable and can be used to dispatch information with relative ease. The web is an emerging consultation tool and both its application and number of users continue to expand.

Uses/strengths

- Can provide publicity, information and limited public input
- Capable of reaching very large numbers with enormous amounts of information
- Offers a low cost way of distributing larger documents
- Offers a highly accessible forum for posting project updates

Special considerations/weaknesses

- Many people still cannot access the web
- Many people are still not web literate
- Its success as a participatory tool is still relatively unknown
- Information overload and poor design can prevent people from finding what they need

Method

- Contact a web designer, or find someone within the organisation with web design skills.
- Discuss the 'architecture', all the levels of information, links and illustrations available and necessary to inform and engage the user.
- Do some background research, web-surfing in your chosen area or field. Discover what works well on other websites, what they cover, what they omit, and use this information to improve your own website.
- Trial the website before releasing it to the public. A bad experience with a website can

mean people do not return. Ensure all links are working, and that the material scrolls smoothly with minimum delays.

- Launch the website with suitable coverage in the media, in newsletters, and in a public forum.
- Ensure that you have alternative communication options for those who are not web-literate or do not have access to the web.
- Place the website address on all correspondence and other printed material from the organisation.

How do people behave online?

- Users are impatient, they are generally short of time and might be paying for their connection.
- Users want instant gratification, they want to see the value of a page immediately, if they do not, there are many other pages available to them.
- Users are active not passive, the Web is a user-driven medium where users have the power to move easily from page to page and want to use it.

Why is reading online different from reading on a page?

- Reading from computer screens is tiring for the eyes and 25% slower than paper.
- Each page must compete with hundreds of millions of others which can be easily accessed, people are less willing to commit the time investment to reading a page in the hope that it is useful.
- Web pages do not have the same credibility as known journals or books, users make judgments about the value of information based on different criteria.

How do people read on the web?

- Eight out of 10 users don't read – they scan the page looking for the information they need.
- Users don't scroll down long pages unless they are clearly told it might contain something useful for them.
- Users don't like hype, the internet is full of marketing that users have learned to ignore when looking for specific information.

Implications for research dissemination

Studies show that when users are faced with a long online document that they would like to read, they print it. The key challenge for successfully communicating the full text of research outputs online is convincing users to print your document.

Sources:

- GDNNet's Toolkit on Disseminating Research Online

Further resources

- Partnerships Online (1999) 'A Toolkit for Online Communities', see: <http://www.partnerships.org.uk/internet/>
- University of Kansas (2002) 'Community Toolbox: Ways to develop Communication Plans' (includes details on websites etc.), see CommunityToolbox website at <http://ctb.ku.edu/about/en/index.jsp>
- More information about how people use the web can be found at Jakob Nielsen's site, see: <http://www.useit.com/>
- Find the most searchable keywords to use on your website:
 - o Wordtracker, see: <http://www.wordtracker.com/>
- Ramalingam, Ben (2005) 'The Knowledge and Learning Toolkit', London: ODI (forthcoming). Especially on the role of internet and intranet in knowledge management strategies.