

REDESIGNING YOUR WEB SITE? DON'T LET TECHNOLOGY GET IN THE WAY OF WHAT YOUR MEMBERS WANT TO ACCOMPLISH.

# enhancing THE USER EXPERIENCE

**H**ow well does your Web site suit the needs and interests of the association, its members, and other constituents? Does the site help—or hinder—the attempts of people to accomplish various tasks? How smoothly are the site and its attendant business processes integrated into the organizational culture?

Incorporating these questions into your Web redesign project will help you take a humane, user-centered approach to a task that is often overshadowed by its technological aspects. Organizations often focus on what technology will do for them when, in fact, they should concentrate more on the people who will be using the technology.

Ignoring the underlying functionality for a moment, a Web site comprises three main components: information architecture (combined with a naming convention, this is the taxonomy), content, and graphic design. When united in one conceptual framework, these three elements create a seamless user experience that supports your organizational brand. For many of your members and other constituents, the user experience is the only face of your organization they will ever see.

## ONE PROJECT'S PROCESS

Last fall, the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA), Arlington, VA, embarked on a Web site and intranet portal project that would introduce a new content management system and collaboration platform, all integrated with its association management system. Janice Dluzynski, senior manager of AAMVA's Information and Knowledge Center, was named the project's manager.

From the start, Dluzynski believed in taking a user-centered approach to crafting a new Web presence for AAMVA, which represents state and provincial officials who administer and enforce motor vehicle laws. "About 50 percent of knowledge management is the culture and the people. Twenty-five percent is the technology, and 25 percent is training," she says. "Determining what works in your culture—and what doesn't—has a lot to do with whether your information and knowledge management practices are going to work."

Here's a recap of what AAMVA learned throughout the project—not only about the Web redesign process but also about its constituents and even itself.

**Tap the right team.** It's generally a good idea to have both technology and communications functions represented

BY JACQUI OLKIN

on your core team, so members can handle the work related to both the back end and the front end of the site. Don't leave out the site's content manager—not addressing content issues early is a common cause of delays in Web redesigns.

In addition to Dluzynski, AAMVA's core project team comprised a member of the communications department responsible for managing Web content and two members of the technology department—a senior director of systems engineering and a systems architect. Their diverse skill sets meant that

team members could make informed decisions about all aspects of the project. The small size of the team also made it nimble, avoiding the paralysis that sometimes comes with decisions by committee.

The four-person team worked directly with Susquehanna Technologies, the vendor chosen to execute the Web project, and facilitated communications internally. "AAMVA's internal team was on board with the fact that a lot of internal marketing and promotion would need to go on—in almost a stealth kind of way," Dluzynski says,

laughing. "It's *persuasive education*."

#### **Get senior managers on your side.**

Many project teams become so involved with their work that they forget to involve and update the people who may be in the best position to help the project succeed.

When the team first presented plans for the Web project at an AAMVA monthly senior management meeting, the aim was to gain budget approval. After that, Dluzynski says, the updates were not about requesting money but rather "asking for their attention to what we're about to do and the impact it will have on the organization."

Dluzynski alerted senior managers that the project would require the time and effort of people in each of their divisions. Having been involved from the beginning in defining and approving the project, they were willing to devote the necessary human resources to the cause.

Informed senior managers can also help drive the cultural changes needed to make your Web project successful. For instance, they can reinforce new business processes, support members of your core or extended project team in new roles, and communicate why your project is important to the organization's strategic direction.

**Have departmental stakeholders define Web audiences.** It's easier to plan, organize, design, and write content if you define your target audiences and what you should communicate to them, provide for them, and ask them to do on the site.

To establish your audience segmentation, invite representatives from each department to gather for a collaborative session. AAMVA, for example, held a series of sessions to define its Web audiences. Although intended to help establish the taxonomy, content strategy, and user experience concept for the Web site, these "target audience" sessions had additional benefits.

"These are busy people who generally don't get a chance to come together and have just a brainstorming session," says Dluzynski. "You could see a lightbulb going on over the heads of everybody who was in the room."

In the sessions, AAMVA discovered discrepancies in the way individual divisions had been thinking about and communicating with the same audience groups. This raised important questions about how AAMVA was managing its strategic communications and marketing activities.

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"[People were asking] 'Do we have a defined image and message that we are articulating to our community and to our other stakeholders? Who's in charge of it? And who's making sure that everybody understands what it is?'" Dluzynski explains. "We realized we needed to develop that central focus."

Newly conscious of the need for more strategic focus and consistency in its communications, AAMVA formed an interdepartmental branding committee. It is charged with ensuring that the new Web site, intranet, and other initiatives reflect a uniform organizational identity and a thoughtful, consistent, audience-focused approach to communications.

#### Let user feedback shape the project.

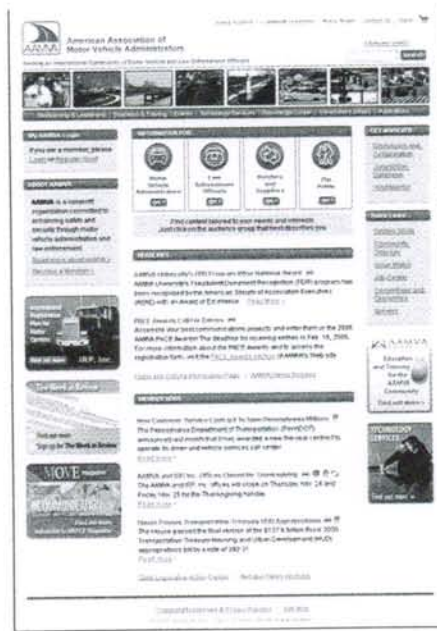
Getting feedback from users helps you establish goals for the new Web site from the outset and refine the technical requirements later on. It also demonstrates your commitment to preparing users—both external and internal—for the changes they will see when your new site launches.

The AAMVA team gathered feedback through face-to-face focus groups, surveys, and informational e-mails. This variety is necessary, notes Dluzynski, because "people process in different ways, and [they] are very busy and don't always respond to the first request or invitation."

Before the project formally kicked off, the team asked AAMVA members and staff to critique the existing Web site and talk about what they wanted in the new site. The team also arranged for focus groups at regional and annual meetings to discuss ideas for a new database of information on motor vehicle administration—a piece of functionality that would affect the way members collected, stored, and used data.

Later, the team convened internal focus groups to review functional requirements for the new database and intranet. They also allowed staff and AAMVA Web users to weigh in on the proposed designs for the new Web site—an invitation that was enthusiastically received.

Asking for feedback not only helps refine project requirements but also publicizes the project internally. Web site redesigns are often taken at face value—as a cosmetic change to an existing site. In AAMVA's case, however, the Web site redesign was only the most visible portion of a much larger project.



As illustrated by the design comp for its new Web site, AAMVA kept users in mind by simplifying navigation, enhancing search capabilities, and reorganizing information.

"Because this project spans the entire community and affects how everyone does their work, it was important for them to understand just how much money and time and effort were being spent to make sure this was going to work," Dluzynski says.

#### DON'T JUST THINK DESIGN

To create a positive user experience, think carefully about presenting an information architecture, naming convention, and navigation scheme that will reflect the way your audiences think about and use information. Make sure your content is well written, ruthlessly edited for length, presented for maximum scannability, and "voiced" appropriately.

Finally, the site's graphic design should communicate, not merely decorate; it should direct users' eyes to what is most important. This last bit of advice means no Flash—*please*—unless you are showing a demo or video. Users don't come to your site for flash, with a little *f* or a big *F*. They come for substance.

Creating the user experience for the new AAMVA Web site involved organizing content in topic-based categories and simplifying navigation. The new design treatment is cleaner than the previous site, which had a distracting background graphic. The content management platform underlying the new Web site enables AAMVA to show audi-

ence-based views of content as well as the topic-based view provided in the taxonomy. Better search and presentation of content complete the user experience.

#### ENSURE USABILITY

How do you know what makes sense to Web users—or confuses them completely? "You can go to your own Web site, pretend that you've never seen it before, and try to understand what's so horrible about it," laughs Dluzynski. "But it really does help to do the usability testing and have people explain to you why they can and cannot find things."

Usability experts can analyze prototypes or design compositions of your site to see that it meets standard, research-based guidelines. Ideally, you should also get feedback from people in each of your primary Web audiences—including internal staff, the board of directors, and the media. You can never truly know what trouble your users may have with a Web interface unless you ask them.

A site organized the way your users think about and use information is one they will use more often and for more purposes, including online registrations and purchases. Also, a user-centered site reduces the number of people calling and e-mailing your association to complain or ask for help. If you add up staff time saved, increased transactions, and how much cheaper it is to get the site right the first time rather than fix it later, you can begin to calculate the ROI of usability testing.

In the early phases of its Web project, AAMVA devoted a week to usability testing. Using an HTML mock-up, AAMVA invited members of its Web audiences to perform tasks under expert observation and provide feedback on the new site's proposed taxonomy and navigation.

In addition to validating many aspects of the new taxonomy and revealing some problems that were easy to correct in the pre-design phase, testing showed the users' heavy reliance on the site's search function. Reliance on search is a trend reflected in recent large-scale usability studies, but the AAMVA usability findings helped the project team justify spending time to optimize content on the new site for internal and external search-engine visibility.

Usability testing also revealed some eye-opening misconceptions unrelated to the

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Web site. For example, users misunderstood some terminology used on the site and even expressed confusion about membership designations. These findings prompted AAMVA to hold multi-departmental conversations about communicating more effectively on the topic of membership.

### GET ON BOARD WITH TRAINING

To deliver full value to an organization and its constituents, content management systems, intranets, collaborative tools, and association management systems all depend on educated users. Unfortunately, many organizations don't spend enough time preparing for user training.

Dluzynski has planned multiple levels of training before and after the spring 2006 launch date of AAMVA's content management system and collaborative intranet. The first priority is training content authors, editors, and administrators to set up and support the new Web site. Then the focus will turn to external users of the site, who must be informed about new features, functionality, and content. Finally, AAMVA will train groups of internal and external users to use the intranet.

All training documents will be customized to the specific audience and easily accessible, with individual training offered on an ongoing basis. All this attention to training should help ensure the adoption of the new systems and processes by the AAMVA community, which includes about 80 staff members. "It's only going to be successful if people buy into it and can see the benefit," says Dluzynski.

Gearing your Web project to the users makes good business sense. Plus, it can strengthen your relationship with your constituents and ensure the relevance of what the association provides for them.

Paying close attention to the human side of Web and other technology projects is also, as AAMVA learned, an opportunity for organizational development. Beginning such a project with an open mind can ultimately change the way your organization communicates, collaborates, and approaches its relationships with constituents. ■

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