Fill'er Up: Automating Hometown News Releases

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Abstract

Everyone wants to see their name in print when a special award or honor is won. And such releases bring praise to the news staff. But preparing these individualized news articles for just one or two papers is time-consuming and detracts from writing other releases that have mass market appeal. Assigning students to write the articles and seek addresses for papers requires a lot of supervision. To address these needs, a form was created on the World Wide Web to generate automatic news stories for award winners. The form allows the recipient of the award to share in the responsibility for accurate dissemination.

Background

The Agriculture Program at Texas A&M University boasts more than 3,000 employees statewide—from at least one county agent covering each of the 254 counties, to the Extension specialists, the Experiment Station researchers, university professors, staff support, and administrators. Even the state's 434,000 4-H members, to a large extent, stand under the Agriculture Program umbrella, for though they are not paid employees, their actions and accomplishments reflect on the system's agencies.

A large number of these university and agency personnel and 4-H members win awards and receive honors throughout the year. These awards and honors may range from being elected an officer in a professional organization to winning the World Food Prize.

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For large international awards such as the World Food Prize, media efforts and coverage are relatively easy and predictable. We are set up to handle the mass media on a state, national and international level. But preparing a two- or three-paragraph story just to go in one small hometown newspaper—and doing this conceivably several thousands of times a year—is not something that the news staff in Agricultural Communications has time to do. Yet, administrators, faculty and staff place a lot of value on seeing recognition of Agriculture Program people in local newspapers.

In April 1997, the Agricultural Communications-News and Public Affairs staff was asked to cover the student awards ceremony for the Department of Soil and Crop Sciences. At least 20 students were being honored either individually or as members of teams for honors and awards collected during the school year. The department wanted a separate story on each student and wanted each story to be sent to that student's hometown newspaper. We agreed to assist, with the intention of assigning a senior student worker to the task. The job was done, but it took more than a month between getting information from the department, going through three edits with the student and tracking down addresses for hometown papers (many of them out of the state and one out of the country). The Soil and Crop Sciences Department was very pleased with the effort and asked if we would do similar jobs for them in the future. But before we could commit, we wanted to devise a better way.

At that time, a discussion on a Public Information Officer Internet List indicated that other than manually writing every story, the best method was to use macros (a single instruction using keystrokes that represent a sequence of instructions in a computer program) and word-processing software. This did not seem like a good solution because someone still would be responsible for the time-consuming effort of collecting and inputting the information. But the notion of having a template onto which unique information could be entered for individual stories launched the idea of using the Web for handling award/honor story development.

The goal was to develop a hometown news release form on the Web so that faculty, staff and students could enter information about awards and honors, suggest two hometown newspapers to which the information should be sent, and click a button to submit the information to Agricultural Communications. The information would automatically be transformed into a complete news release with correct style ready for a quick edit before dissemination, and addresses for

the two suggested newspapers would be easily transferred to mailing labels for appropriate dissemination.

Method

A news release from a previous award announcement was used as an example to devise a generic release. Words or phrases in that release that would be applicable to a specific winner were turned into blanks. Words or phrases that would be applicable to all award/honor stories remained. The draft of the story looked like this (underlined words designate blanks to be filled in):

Month Today, Year

TITLE

Contact: First Lastname, (ac) phone-number, email@tamu.edu

DATELINE — First Lastname of hometown has received name of honor/award at a recent event in location.

Lastname is a title or degree/classification at location of university/ agency affiliation.

Comment on requirements for award/honor.

Description of citations/remarks about the award/honor.

Lastname earned list of degrees, locations and dates.

To get this information, a form had to be developed to ask the right questions, and, wherever possible, to provide a selection of answers in Associated Press style from which the person using the form could select. A draft of the form used to develop the Web page looked like this (information in brackets indicates the instructions for how to write the enabling computer program):

Hometown News Release to Announce Awards and Honors

This Month: [provide the months in AP style]

Year: [number to click on]

Today: [number to click on]

Title: (suggestion: Lastname wins state honors at soil judging contest) [box to fill in]

Contact: (students enter professor who knows about this award/ honor you are receiving. Faculty/staff enter your own name) [box to fill in]

Your phone number: (students enter phone number of professor named above) [box to fill in],

Your email: (students enter phone number of professor above) [box to fill in]

Name of city/town where you are affiliated with Texas A&M: [click on box with all Agriculture Program locations as options]

Your first and last name: [Box to fill in]

Your hometown: [Box to fill in]

Your award or honor: [Box to fill in]

Name of event /contest you attended or organization that issued the honor: [Box to fill in]

Location of event: [Box to fill in]

What is your title for faculty/staff or degree/classification for students: [Box to fill in]

Describe in no more than 250 words the competition that was required to win the award, or the purpose behind the honor that was bestowed: [Comment box]

Describe in no more than 250 words any citations or remarks that were noted as a part of your award/honor. [Comment box]

Select the degree(s) you have, the university from which you earned it(them) and the year it(they) was bestowed: (Example: bachelor's in agricultural journalism from Texas A&M in 1978. [Click on bachelor's, master's, doctorate and three boxes to fill in]

The next step was to create the computer program that would enable the information entered into the form to automatically merge into a news article and arrive as an E-mail message in the designated computer. With all stories going to one computer, the editor/recipient can verify the validity of each message and forward it to the appropriate staff writer (by beat designation) for dissemination.

The language used to write the CGI (Common Gateway Interface) application program is PERL (Practical Extraction and Report Language). The main reason to choose PERL as the working language is that it is optimized for text processing. It uses sophisticated pattern-matching techniques to scan large amounts of data very quickly. PERL naturally became our working language since our hometown news-release form is basically all text and needs many pattern-matching locations for inputs (e.g., Validate users' inputs). PERL is

also an interpreted language which means no compilation is needed contrary to most other computer languages. This feature of PERL makes it easy to code as well as to maintain. All above features make PERL one of the most popular Web-based application languages today.

The biggest concern in our design and development of the program was that it be user-friendly. We wanted to make it as convenient as possible to the users who fill in the form, and as efficient as possible for the person who is responsible for processing the filled form. For example, we used many pull-down menus rather than text fields in the Web form for those fields which need to conform to certain standards (e.g., Associated Press style for date and state name). So front-end users do not have to worry whether their inputs are correct or not, rather they just click and select.

Another feature we worked on diligently to implement was the preview option. We want users be able to see what their inputs look like before submission, and we want the program to be capable of bringing the users to exactly where they were if they are not satisfied with the preview or simply want to make some changes. It means that they can modify the contents based on the existing inputs rather than starting from a blank form and having to do it all over. We used embedded Javascripts to implement this feature. After the user submits the filled-in form, the CGI program processes the form into the right format and E-mails it to the designated computer automatically.

Another strategy of developing the program was to make it compatible to various computer platforms and Web browsers. The program has been tested on PC, Macintosh, Unix, and Linux. It runs well under Netscape versions 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0, and Internet Explorer versions 3.0 and 4.0 which are the most used platforms, according to the statistics program we ran on our news Web page.

Results

This project was started in July 1997. The form was put on the Web (agnews.tamu.edu/form.htm) about six weeks later during the first week of August. An E-mail message promoting the site was sent to the "everyone" list of the Agriculture Program to notify more than 3,000 employees. Notice also was included in various online internal publications and notices. Two additional notices have been sent via E-mail to remind various groups about its availability.

There has been some need to assist people with the idea of filling out forms online. Some people attempt to fill in only partial

information (apparently thinking that Agricultural Communications will follow up to obtain the missing data); however, the computer language was written so that all vital information must be filled in or a message appears indicating that the form must be completed before it can be sent. This has been a good learning tool both to instruct our employees on the use of the Web and to educate them about what is necessary for a complete news article.

Initially, some people thought they would send the information to us and have us fill in the form. When this happened, we responded via E-mail thanking them for the interest, expressing the desire to help disseminate the information, but tactfully instructing them that they would be responsible for completing the form online. All were glad to do so and, having tried it, expressed that it was useful and easy. In one case, a county agent argued that her county did not have Web technology and tried to get us to handle the information because of that. We checked with Extension Information and Technology, however, and found that her county had recently purchased a computer with the intent of getting on the Web (as virtually all 254 counties are). Thus, we responded that her county would need to continue with their traditional method of releasing such stories until they get on the Web. Thus, the form is yet another incentive for taking the steps to get on the Web.

Receiving stories generated from the Web site also has helped the Agriculture Communications staff to be more aware of events taking place in the state.

Comments about the service all have been positive, both from those who already have used it and those who intend to use it in the future.

Conclusions

This service is new and unique. Since Agriculture Communications did not have a good system in place to handle hometown news releases, selling the faculty and staff on this idea will require more effort and take longer than pitching an alternative to an existing service. Promotional efforts must continue in order to enable the Web form for hometown news releases to become routine for Agriculture Program employees.

Eventually, the use of the form will increase, and with that so will the publicity for the efforts extended by the Agriculture Program faculty and staff.