

Using Feedback Panels to Analyze a Web Site's Target Audiences

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Abstract

Colleges and universities develop Web sites to help them recruit and retain students, connect with alumni and donors, and communicate internally, among other activities. In 2004, the faculty and staff in Kansas State University's Department of Animal Sciences and Industry completed a redesign of its Web site, partially based on findings of two online surveys completed by members of nine target audiences. This feedback approach allowed a communications working group to acquire marketing data quickly and reliably. The working group used this information to address usability concerns and design a site with features that target audiences want. The results indicate that Web users prefer functionality over visual appeal and less cluttered sites. This approach to gathering feedback provides opportunities for continuing analyses of Web user groups, including longitudinal studies with the same group or comparison studies with new members of the same user groups.

Introduction

In late August 2005, Google listed the number of Web pages indexed by its search engine at 8 million pages (Google.com, 2005). In 2003, the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics reported that Internet access in the country's high schools had grown from 35% in 1994 to 99% in 2002. Speaking to various audiences, Steve Kappler says that global traffic on the World Wide Web doubles every 100 days (Kappler, 2004). Kappler is a senior consultant for Stamats, a higher education marketing company.

These three examples reflect the enormity of the World Wide Web, but also a grand opportunity that stands before American universities and colleges. A well-built Web page is like a well-adorned entryway to the university, open 24 hours a day and seven days a week to students, alumni and many other important groups of people.

Colleges and universities develop Web sites to help them recruit students, retain current students, connect with alumni and potential donors, highlight the expertise of their faculty and staff, and more.

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The Department of Animal Sciences and Industry (ASI) at Kansas State University completed a redesign of its Web site in the fall of 2004. The new design contains elements that users said they wanted, based on feedback obtained from groups of targeted users. The site capitalizes on the capability of database-driven fields, a structure known as a content management system, which allows individuals to update a Web site even if that person has no experience with hypertext markup language (HTML) or other Web languages. The newly designed site is online at <http://asi.ksu.edu>.

The marketing study, which is the focus of this article, was conducted because ASI faculty and staff had only a limited knowledge of their target audiences, particularly user habits for viewing Web pages and the specific information they were looking for when visiting this department's Web site. ASI faculty and staff were particularly anxious to gather feedback and develop a new site because they were nearing a key time of year when high school students were seeking college information and making their college choices. ASI also had experienced a previous unsuccessful attempt to redesign its site, and the site at the time was outdated and considered unattractive.

In early 2003, members of the Kansas State University Department of Communications agreed to plan and develop a content management Web site for ASI. The communications team included university-employed professionals in computer programming, Web design, marketing, graphic design, and project management. An aggressive timeline was developed, marketing and research priorities were identified, and short-, medium-, and long-term goals were agreed upon. To provide targeted communications, the marketing study and subsequent recommendations heavily emphasized meeting the needs of primary target groups (in this case, three groups of students and Kansas livestock producers).

Understanding target audiences, or those users most likely to visit and benefit from a Web site, is a central element in determining a promotional strategy for the site. NetIQ, a company that specializes in Web management and support for businesses, notes that the Web is becoming "the hub for all marketing activities (NetIQ.com, 2002, pp. 48-49)." When a customer—for universities, future and current students are "customers," for example—visits a Web site, a brand interaction occurs, and the business (university) has an opportunity to encourage the visitor to take action. Whether or not students who visit college Web sites can easily find the information they seek may eventually determine whether or not they perform the desired action (enrolling in the college or university).

Literature Review

Feedback panels are described as “a continuing group that responds periodically to questioning,” and in marketing, “a rather common survey method” (Blankenship, Breen, & Dutka, 1998). Structured similarly to focus groups, feedback panels are especially useful for gathering information quickly about target audiences. They can exist for as little as a week, but usually longer, and up to a year or more. Some key advantages of feedback panels include the opportunity for longitudinal analysis, cost-effectiveness, and data is easy to tabulate. Users provide feedback while in their own “environment,” rather than a structured research setting.

Nielsen and Mack (1994) reported that by surveying as few as five users and administering multiple iterations, Web site developers can uncover 98% of a site’s usability problems. For multiple groups of users, Nielsen says that three to five users per group is an adequate number to give reliable results. These findings are supported by methods employed by the Jefferson Center (2004), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that advocates for the democratic process through a technique it calls the Citizen’s Jury. The Jefferson Center regularly builds feedback panels consisting of eight to 12 people who are targeted to fit specific objectives and respond to questions built around those objectives. The group acknowledges that a small-group feedback panel does not allow full representation of all members’ views, but it does provide the type of in-depth discussion needed to conduct careful deliberation of select issues.

Electronic mail offers new ways to collect information on target audiences. Kanetkar (2000) notes that there is growing acceptance within the marketing research community of using e-mail surveys to gather data. Another study found that mail surveys had more missing values and shorter answers to open-ended questions when compared to e-mail (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). One reason researchers use e-mail instead of postal mail for surveys is the convenience of obtaining data, not for cost savings. Couper, Blair, and Triplett (1999) showed that the cost was nearly the same for both methods.

As with focus group research, feedback panels include a small group of carefully selected participants who share common characteristics. Blankenship et al. (1998, p. 217) explained that focus groups are not intended to be a “sample,” per se, but every effort must be made to keep the group representative of the specific problem. When the Internet is used for such groups, Blankenship notes that a predetermined set of questions is developed and only prescreened individuals are allowed to participate in the discussion.

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According to Stamats, Inc. (2004a), parents are the No. 1 influence on teens' choice of a college or university. Stamats also reports that visiting a Web site is the No. 2 activity undertaken by parents to obtain information on colleges and universities (2003). Further, 84% of college-bound teens surveyed by Stamats said that they had searched for college information on the Web (Stamats, 2004b).

Methods

The design of this study is based on a strategic marketing plan led by staff in the K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) Department of Communications, with faculty and staff in ASI. Members of the two groups met twice in the fall of 2003 to develop a marketing outline, based on a marketing worksheet developed by specialists in the KSRE Department of Communications.

The discussion at these meetings centered around a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the department, ASI's goals for the Web site, and the anticipated target audiences. Members of the marketing team compiled information from these two meetings, prioritized target audiences, and developed a list of questions to be used in obtaining users' feedback.

Table 1. *Listing of Target Audiences and Their Priority Ranking for the Kansas State University Department of Animal Sciences' Web Site.*

Target Group	N
Primary	
Undergraduate students	4
Graduate students	5
Prospective students	4
Kansas livestock producers	6
Secondary	
Legislative aides	3
County extension agents	4
Livestock/food industry groups	2
Tertiary	
ASI faculty/staff	2
Agricultural media	2

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The research plan developed from this marketing analysis was approved by ASI. The study included two feedback sessions to collect quantitative and qualitative data with a preselected group of 32 people representing nine target audiences (Table 1). The make-up of the feedback panel was weighted more heavily toward the primary target audiences (students and livestock producers) so that more than half of the participants (19) represented these groups. Similarly, the number of users selected from the group of secondary target audiences (9) exceeded the number chosen for the tertiary audiences (4). Since two of ASI's major goals for the site are to recruit and retain students, the user groups also were weighted more heavily toward younger users, compared to an October 2003 profile of Web users in the United States (Table 2). In this study, 70.5% of the feedback participants fell into the 18-49 age group.

Table 2. Comparison of Feedback Panelists by Age to a Profile of United States Web Users

Age	% of ASI Panelists ¹	Age	% of U.S. Users ²
18-under	18.5	<18	20.0
19-29 ³	29.5	18-24	7.7
30-39 ³	15.0	25-34	15.7
40-49 ³	26.0	35-49	29.1
50-59	11.0	50-54	9.0
60+	0	55-64	11.5
		65+	7.0

¹Data based on 27 respondents to a feedback survey administered in March 2004.

²Information provided by the ClickZ Network and accessed online at <http://www.clickz.com>.

³In the key target groups considered for this study, the percent of users is 70.5% for the ASI panelists ages 19-49, and 52.5% for the profile of 18-49-year-old users provided by the ClickZ Network.

For the student user groups, a list of potential participants (all of whom were ASI students) was submitted by ASI faculty. KSRE marketing staff selected feedback panelists from this list to represent gender and rural/urban backgrounds equally. Gender and location within the state of Kansas also contributed to selecting feedback panelists from other user groups. Legislative aides, most of whom were working in Washington, D.C., were selected to represent the state's congressional delegation.

The feedback participants were contacted by phone or e-mail to obtain their consent to participate in the study. They were instructed that the study

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would be conducted by e-mail, given an approximate time frame for when their help would be needed, and told that they would be asked to respond based on their personal opinions, not on what they think others would like to see on the Web site. They were also informed that participation in this study was voluntary. All of the preselected panelists gave consent and were willing to participate by e-mail. An additional requirement was that they had access to the Internet at home or work, though they were encouraged to complete the feedback questions while viewing the ASI site at the location from which they were most likely to be seeking this information.

The first feedback session was conducted in March 2004, and asked these target users to provide feedback on the ASI site as it was available online at that time. It was hoped that the comments received in this first round of feedback would either reinforce ideas for the Web site submitted by members of ASI and the Department of Communications, or create new ideas that responded to specific user needs. The primary goal of this feedback session was to understand the content preferences of ASI's target users, though the researchers also collected demographic data. The quantitative data collected was presented in tables. The qualitative data was grouped in cluster summaries, according to the method suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The second feedback session was conducted in May 2004, after development of the site was underway, but not yet final. During this stage of feedback, users were asked to react to four proposed designs for the ASI home page, and to two designs for the main content area of the home page. The emphasis in this feedback session was on graphic design, including colors, positioning of elements, photo collages and banners. Since demographic data on these users had already been collected, the researchers only collected qualitative data, which again was grouped in cluster summaries.

After each round of feedback, the marketing coordinator for the Department of Communications presented to the leader of the ASI working group a written summary of the data and a summary letter with recommendations on how to apply the findings. The ASI working group leader was encouraged to discuss the results with the ASI department head, offer new ideas, and consider users' suggestions for inclusion on the site. The marketing coordinator also discussed the findings with the KSRE communications working group, which included the department's coordinator of information and educational technology, Web master, graphic designer, and lead programmer. Part of the KSRE group's focus was to consider the technological feasibility of including new suggestions within the structure of a content management system.

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Results

Of the 32 feedback panelists, 27 responded to the first feedback questionnaire. Of these respondents, nearly three in four indicated that they use the Internet daily, and 63% were under age 40. In this portion of the study, 96% of the users were using a Windows operating system, and 85% used the Internet Explorer browser to view the ASI Web site. One in four users used a dial-up modem to connect to the Internet, while those connected to a Local Area Network, cable or digital hook-up made up 60% of the respondents. The complete quantitative results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Demographic Summary of Feedback Respondents*

Variable	Primary ¹	Secondary ²	Tertiary ³	Total(%)
Age				
18-under	5	0	0	5 (18.5%)
19-29	5	3	0	8 (29.5%)
30-39	0	2	2	4 (15%)
40-49	2	3	2	7 (26%)
50-59	2	1	0	3 (11%)
60+	0	0	0	0 (0%)
Operating system used				
Windows	14	9	3	26 (96%)
Macintosh	0	0	1	1 (4%)
Browser used				
IE Explorer	14	5	4	23 (85%)
Netscape	0	4	0	4 (15%)
Internet connection				
LAN	3	2	4	9 (33%)
Modem	6	1	0	7 (26%)
Cable	2	3	0	5 (18.5%)
DSL	2	3	0	5 (18.5%)
Other ⁴	1	0	0	1 (4%)
Frequency of Internet usage				
Daily	8	8	4	20 (74%)
4-6/week	5	0	0	5 (18.5%)
1-3/week	0	1	0	1 (4%)
<1/week	0	1	0	1 (4%)
1/month	0	0	0	0 (0%)
Almost never	0	0	0	0 (0%)

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Variable	Primary ¹	Secondary ²	Tertiary ³	Total(%)
Reason for using Internet				
Business	5	9	3	17 (63%)
Fun	0	0	0	0 (0%)
Both equally	9	0	1	10 (37%)

Respondents $N = 27$

¹Primary target audience consists of prospective, undergraduate and graduate students; and Kansas livestock producers

²Secondary target audience consists of legislative aides, extension agents, and livestock/food industry groups.

³Tertiary target audience consists of faculty/staff in the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry; and members of the Kansas farm media.

⁴One respondent replied "ethernet," which could apply to any of the listed services.

Qualitative data was collected in both the first and second feedback sessions, and the results presented here are a cumulative summary of both. Seven trends emerged in the comments received from these target audiences:

1. Web users preferred functionality over visual appeal. One respondent, a member of a primary target group, said: "I really don't care about the image (that the site portrays) as long as I can find things."
2. Web users liked a site that is simple, less cluttered, and portrays a "clean" appearance. Respondents made many comments like, "I don't like trying to find things ... I think pages need to be clear and concise" and that one of the sites given as an example "was much easier to find information quickly and it wasn't as confusing or 'messy' looking."
3. Web users prefer menus with listings over drop-down menus. This was evident when respondents were asked to view variations of content menus and score their preferences on a Likert scale. The menu listings scored higher among all user groups.
4. Web users wanted this site to be clear in its identity with Kansas State University. There were several comments which encouraged this department to take advantage of users' connection to the university's color (purple) and mascot (the Wildcat).
5. Web users preferred sans-serif fonts over serif fonts. This was not necessarily a surprise to the working groups, which preferred sans-serif fonts as well. However, it is interesting to note that the respondents' comments indicate that they understand the difference between the

fonts, and that they believed strongly enough to include this in their comments.

6. Web users emphasized the importance of having an easy-to-use and reliable search engine. One user in a primary target group noted: "When I get to any site for information, I want to be able to go right to a 'Search' so I can quickly access information." Another said that "[A search engine] is the first thing I look for on a university Web site, and for this site, it was immediately found."
7. Web users emphasized the importance of keeping updated information on the site. While much of this includes having updated information on courses, faculty, staff, publications, and more, users also said they'd like to see areas of the home page that have current news and events.

Comments were further analyzed by separating user groups into five categories, shown in Table 4. All of the groups indicated the importance of having current information on activities and events within the department on a Web site. Students, whether already enrolled in the department or considering enrolling in the future, were very interested in course and program information, and how to contact department staff for more information.

Table 4. *Categories Preferred by Feedback Participants Commenting on the Kansas State University Department of Animal Sciences and Industry Web Site*

Users	Categories
Current students ¹	Courses, activities, campus links
Future students	Programs, activities, contact information
Livestock producers	Dates of events, information on the dept., people
Secondary audiences ²	Links to other campus sites, current events
Tertiary audiences ³	Faculty photos and research, news, people, activities

¹Current students include undergraduate and graduate students.

²Secondary target audience consists of legislative aides, extension agents, and livestock/food industry groups.

³Tertiary target audience consists of faculty/staff in the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry; and members of the Kansas farm media.

Discussion

The results of these feedback sessions with user groups guided the development of the content management Web site for the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry at Kansas State University. In building the site, the communications working group often incorporated users' preferences in choosing site colors, photo collages and banners, content headings,

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events calendars, menu listings, and more. But the feedback panelists' comments weren't the only aid in developing the new site.

Members of the communications working group also reviewed numerous animal sciences Web sites from colleges and universities in the Midwest region, including several Big 12 schools and land-grant universities in nearby states. A major emphasis for the ASI Web site was that it should distinguish itself functionally and visually compared to these schools—which were determined to be competitors for animal science students—because in the working group's opinion, none of the other colleges' and universities' Web sites did so. ASI can begin to determine how well its new site distinguishes itself from the competition by surveying students during freshman orientation, monitoring traffic to the site, and continuing to obtain feedback from users.

The communications working group also considered advice it received from the public relations firm of Fleishman-Hillard in 2000 concerning a Web site's ability to attract younger audiences. In an internal report outlining a marketing analysis for KSRE, a senior executive for Fleishman-Hillard wrote: "The interest categories [for KSRE] indicated stronger interest among younger audiences, by about 20 percentage points. This point suggests you'll need to keep vigilant in making your programs fit the form and function needed by young audiences. The older groups were raised reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching TV. The younger groups were raised playing video games, surfing the Net, and watching TV." Further, it was learned through telephone surveys of all Kansas citizens that nearly 40% more were using the Internet in the year 2000 than four years earlier, and they were using it largely for information-gathering (Market Research Institute, 2000).

These are compelling statements that highlight the need to build a university Web site that distinguishes itself among the numerous competitors for students and stands out among the millions of Internet sites. These statements also support the findings of the feedback study. Users continually preferred substance over glamour, and that was a key driver for the communications working group as they developed the ASI Web site.

Building a Web site is a difficult process. A tremendous amount of communication needs to take place among marketing, technical, design, and client groups. Some communication breakdowns did occur during the development of the ASI Web site, such as confusion among the ASI and communication working groups over which databases would be created. However, from a marketing and communication perspective, one reason for the overall success of the project was that the client accepted two premises developed

by the communication team: 1) The client is not the user, nor is the client necessarily like their user; and 2) it's impossible to sit in a university conference room and imagine what a group's potential users need and want from their Web site. Because ASI needed information fast, the feedback panels were an ideal way to gather information that improved the usability of this Web site.

The work leaves plenty of opportunity for continuing study. For one, the feedback participants remain willing to participate in online discussion of the ASI Web site, so a longitudinal analysis of users' needs is possible. That approach could give a good indication of how well the redesign of the ASI Web site fits these users' needs. However, a richer data set is possible by building user groups with different participants, which will allow a comparison of users with similar characteristics. Members of the communication working group also are considering the feedback panel approach in additional redesign projects.

About the Author

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