ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF UNIVERSITY WEBSITES WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR WEB DESIGNERS AND EDUCATORS

NANCY GRONEMAN HITE
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS 66801

BARBARA RAILSBACK
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS 66801

ABSTRACT

The development of customer-centered websites is a difficult but essential component of many organizations' overall management information systems. Specifically, the study examined the content and characteristics of the web home pages and admission-related web pages of a sample of institutions listed in the U.S. News & World Report List of Best Colleges & Universities to help web developers create customer-centric sites and to help web design educators teach students to create such sites. Overall, the content of the text and the images was user-centered. Three design principles were followed on over 90% of the websites: consistency of font styles as well as text and background colors, fast loading time, and hyperlinks placed in the two places users view first. Accessibility by the visually impaired may be difficult as numerous websites used images and bullets as hyperlinks and did not have high contrast between text and background colors.

Keywords: websites, content analysis, web design, user-interface

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Website development has evolved over the years, from an emphasis on the technical aspects of website creation in the early days of the World Wide Web when organizations merely had a presence on the Web to a more product-oriented emphasis a few years ago and now to customer-centered websites. However, the creation of customer-centric websites is difficult given increased competition among organizations, technological changes, the current economic conditions, and cultural changes in the U.S.

Like corporations, universities have discovered that websites can be an important method of communication [3]. University websites have developed almost as rapidly as corporate websites. While websites can provide many benefits, a number of challenges also arise. Like corporate websites, campus websites attract a variety of internal and external audiences/customer. Information systems professionals who design those sites must find the best ways to adapt the technological capabilities of the Web to fit the needs of quite diverse audiences [3]. The focus of this research study is on university websites because they exemplify ones that must meet the needs of a wide-ranging audience. University websites must provide vital information for on-campus and off-campus users including students, prospective students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and many others.

In the early years of website creation, one individual — a webmaster — was usually in charge of an entire website; but nowadays, website development is often a team approach. A development team may include a web master, designer, and programmer [5], as well as numerous department heads and directors of campus programs. Development team members need a potpourri of skills including (1) marketing skills, (2) technical skills to create aesthetically-pleasing web pages with effective user-interfaces, and (3) knowledge of the most effective content to be presented. Website content has become of primary importance with website viewers preferring substance over style and usefulness over glitter [4].

The creation of a usable and aesthetically-pleasing website has become one important aspect of an overall branding or integrated marketing program in most corporations and universities. In recent years, the marketing of universities has gone from being looked upon with skepticism to being embraced by individuals on and off campus. Generally, marketing programs cover all of a university's outreach activities, including the website, and are centered on a central "brand" that represents its reputation and its future [12].

All members of a development team need to be aware of when and how to use the organization's name, logo, and tag line, and thereby create brand equity. Brand equity is the value of the brand in the marketplace. As the value increases, it leads to higher levels of brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Although the marketing component of a website is often influenced by a public relations department, the IT person or team in charge of the website is often given the credit or receives the reprimand if the site is or is not an effective marketing tool.

RELATED LITERATURE

The relationship between an organization's website and the marketing of an organization can be an interesting one. One might presume that organizations actively using websites to reach their target audiences would experience positive results. However, a study [7] of universities showed that those institutions with lower levels of excellent students and lower levels of alumni gift giving were more likely to use the Web to reach prospective students and parents than those with better students and higher donation levels. That study concluded that schools behind in school excellence use the Web as an important public relations tool to overcome their inferiority to superior schools [7]. Additionally, schools with low freshman student retention rates had the most intrusive ads on their websites and had the most downloadable graphics [7].

Today, nearly all medium to large businesses and most universities have websites, with some being more effective than


