

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT: HOW TO BUILD A WEB SITE EVERYONE LOVES

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ABSTRACT

Too many college and university Web sites are battlegrounds. This dissention among marketing, IT, and faculty makes it difficult to create effective Web sites. The objective of this paper is to identify what university marketers and Web developers need to do to build consensus on campus before building a Web site.

INTRODUCTION

Ownership of college and university Web sites, just like corporate Web sites, is up for grabs, with departments and faculty going toe-to-toe with each other to maintain or take control of various aspects of the Web site. A 2004 reportⁱ from Jupiter Research in New York highlights the problem in the corporate world: “Often there is neither an incentive for units to work together to accommodate each other’s objectives, nor a governance mechanism to maximize the overall value of the Web site as a corporate asset.” In the world of higher education, the problem is complicated by the fact that university Web sites are larger (containing 250 times more pages than the average Web siteⁱⁱ) and have been around since the first days of the World Wide Web. And yet the value of the university Web site as an asset has never been higher. Teens, a primary audience, are using the Internet in record numbersⁱⁱⁱ while adult audiences (such as parents, alumni, and donors) are increasingly using the university Web sites to stay connected and get up-to-date news and information.

Indiana University has identified seven ingredients for governing the Web development process for top-level university Web sites: 1. A High-Level Purpose for the Web Site, 2. Market Research, 3. User-Centered Design, 4. An Integrated Working Team of Marketers and Web Developers, 5. Graphic Design that Captures the Brand Essence, 6. Killer Content, and 7. Widespread Communication and Involvement. This paper will also explore benefits of bridging the efforts of marketing and information technology (IT) teams. Three case studies from Indiana University will show how by putting these seven ingredients in place and by building consensus, we were able to build successful Web sites for IU South Bend (www.iusb.edu), the IU Bloomington School of Music (www.music.indiana.edu), and the IU Bloomington Department of Chemistry (www.chem.indiana.edu).

By bringing together the people who know how to tell the institution’s story best—public relations and marketing staffs, campus administrators and leaders, and top faculty members—and creating a Web development plan that puts the focus on the Web site’s purpose and communications objectives, the entire Web development process stays on track and is less likely to be held hostage by competing interests or a lack of comfort with the Internet as a communications tool. And while there may be people who hold out—such as faculty or departments who insist on developing their own pages or having their own Web servers—our

experience has shown that the excitement and quality work that result from this Web development process mitigate this type of behavior.

1. Give Your Web Site a High-Level Purpose

The first step in designing or redesigning any university Web site is to identify the owners (or stakeholders) and to question them about the high-level purpose of the Web site. By getting Web site owners to think critically about the importance and potential of their Web site as a communications channel at the outset, they are more likely to champion the entire design or redesign process.

The key to success with stakeholder interviews is getting the right people at the table. There are the obvious players—presidents, vice presidents, chancellors, and deans—but it’s important not to underestimate the influence individual faculty or staff members may have in controlling the Web environment. Find out who maintains the Web site and which faculty members are running subsites on their own servers and invite them to participate. Once you have your stakeholders gathered, ask them pointed questions about what’s working or not with the current Web presence, who are the audiences, and what tasks they want users to be able to accomplish on the Web site.

We have found that stakeholder interviews lay the foundation for a successful Web development project because what stakeholders say in the interviews provides the team with guiding thoughts about what they need to accomplish. For example, when our team was asked to redesign the IU School of Music Web site, the dean told us he wanted his Web site to “bombard [audiences] with who we are,” encouraging us to create something dramatic and unique. Stakeholder interviews with the IU Department of Chemistry yielded the following guiding thoughts from key faculty members: “show prospective students all the exciting and important research being conducted here.” For our team, this was an invitation to ask the faculty to add an additional \$8,000 to their budget for photography of students and faculty doing laboratory research.

After all the stakeholder interviews are conducted, our team reports back to the entire stakeholder group with a written proposal for the project based on the agreed upon goals and objectives. If the stakeholders agree to proceed, this is the official starting point for the project.

2. Testing, Testing: The Importance of Market Research

So your stakeholders have set the lofty goals for your project. Now what? We have found that a little market research goes a long way to assure that our Web sites resonate with their various audiences. After we conduct stakeholder interviews, we like to gather groups of audience members, such as prospective or current students, parents, alumni, or high school guidance counselors, and ask them what they expect from the Web site. Market research efforts such as these give our team valuable insights about the audience expectations for graphic design, content, and overall experience.

Market research can also be valuable in showing stakeholders how users think. For example, for our redesign of the IU South Bend Web site, we conducted card-sorting activities with traditional

undergraduates and nontraditional undergraduates on campus and with prospective high school students in the area. The users indicated that the information they most wanted to find online about majors included:

- degree requirements,
- degree prerequisites, and
- course descriptions.

We used these findings to develop the primary navigation for the Web site in addition to developing a new section for the Web site devoted to academic majors and programs that included these three crucial pieces of information for each major and program. The research compelled all the schools and divisions on the campus to pull together information for the Web site that had previously been missing or was incomplete on the existing Web site. By showing the schools and divisions what users really wanted, instead of having them make their best guesses, they were able to respond with information that would improve the experience of future users seeking information about majors.

Knowledge of what the audiences expect and want from a Web site has been a valuable tool for us in Web development. It influences the organization of information, labels and terminology, photo choices, messages and voice of copy, programming, and file structure.

Another critical aspect of research is the opportunity it gives the Web development team to demonstrate the importance of the Internet as a communications tool for key audiences, especially teens. For example, we often share with our clients information about national trends from the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Its most recent study on “Teens and Technology” found that 57 percent of online teens use the Internet to search for a school they might attend. This type of information is invaluable to clients, especially as they are working to secure funding for Web site improvements.

3. Seeing the Web Site through a User’s Eyes: The Benefits of Usability Testing

User-centered design is based on users, not insiders. At the outset of most Web projects, we conduct user testing in a usability lab with the existing Web site to reveal user problems with terminology and navigation. Some of the most eye-opening experiences with our clients have occurred when they observe users trying to find information on their Web sites and see the users having trouble getting to the information.

This user testing is invaluable in guiding the process of building a new structure (or information architecture) for the Web site. After the new structure is built, it is tested again with users. We measure the percentage of tasks that users complete correctly. Our goal for the percent of completed tasks is between 80 and 100 percent.

4. Working Together in Harmony

At this stage in the process, much of the work of building consensus has been done. The stakeholders have identified a high-level purpose for the Web site, research with users has

provided insights on audience expectations, and usability testing has identified problems with the existing Web site. This work has provided an outline of what the Web design or redesign project needs to achieve. Now it's time to align your team and start building the site.

In the more than 40 Web sites our team has built for internal university clients, we have found over and over again that Web sites—arguably the most important communications tool for a university—are the battleground between marketing/communications offices and IT departments. While the marketers want to get important information out to users, they are limited by their lack of technology skills or by their lack of knowledge about how Web sites work. IT professionals may have the skills to create and publish Web pages, but they often lack graphic design or writing skills. While each group may want to control the other department or the Web site, it's important for campus leaders to bridge these two units together and ask them to work collaboratively on Web sites. By bridging these two units—and by utilizing content management systems or simple Web page editing tools—it's suddenly possible to do the impossible: keep the Web site up-to-date.

It's important to note that in our experience we encounter many clients who work with IT professionals who are pushing for the adoption and deployment of complex content management systems. While content management systems are excellent tools, many university Web sites are lacking a content development system or process. No one is assigned to write content for the Web site on a regular basis and no quality control mechanisms are in place for content editing and approval. In our Web development process, we stress the criticality of having a content development process in place before implementing a content management system.

5. Capturing the Essence of the Brand

In an article titled “Top 10 Mistakes of .EDU Websites,”^{iv} Kari Chisholm and Michael Stoner write that “Branding isn't slapping your logo everywhere on your website; it involves content choices, presentation, and hierarchy, as well as imagery and functionality.”

In asking our stakeholders to consider the high-level purpose of their Web site, we also ask them about their brand: What is their campus, school, department, or organization about? How do they represent their brand offline? Why do students choose to study there?

In thinking about the brand, our Web development team strives to go beyond the obvious decisions about logo placement, colors, and fonts. We consider messages and voice of the copy, the best way to present navigation so users can find information quickly and easily, and how to take users through processes (such as how to apply) in a simple, straightforward way. We realize that photography and interactive features are a critical part of the brand experience because teenagers prefer sites that are easy to scan or offer information through illustrated concepts.^v

When we worked with the IU School of Music on redesigning their Web site, we learned that students choose the school because of its top-notch faculty and its overall reputation as a leading music school. However, prospective students wanted to see that they would have many performance opportunities at the school, and this wasn't clear on the old Web site. To create excitement and help convey the quality of music and performances, we developed a custom

audio player that plays music clips of student and faculty performances. To further drive home the point that the IU School of Music offers a multitude of performance opportunities, we created three “windows” on the home page for the IU School of Music to fill with photos of upcoming performances.

To make the brand part of the governing process for Web development, it’s critical for the stakeholders to agree on how they define the brand and to see that the graphic design of the Web site captures the brand. Once stakeholders are satisfied that the Web site captures the brand, they are more likely to champion the proliferation of the look and feel of the Web site throughout the entire Web environment. For example, the scope of our Web development project for the IU School of Music included only the home page, 2nd tiers, and key subsites (such as alumni and admissions). It did not include the departments within the school. However, we did provide a template for departments to use, and, at the urging of the school’s stakeholders, this template has been used by the majority of departments.

6. Killer Content

Because few university offices have dedicated staff members who focus on creating and updating Web content, we’ve found that content development is often one of the primary reasons clients come to us for a Web site redesign project. Clients acknowledge that their desire to have a user-friendly information system along with a great-looking graphic design is an important factor in their decision to hire professional Web developers. However, they also tell us they simply don’t have the staff or the time to write and edit all the content they know they need to put online. Even if our clients do have in-house writing capabilities, these writers are often unfamiliar with the best ways to write for the Web or they simply don’t understand how to work within the Webspace.

Content is a critical part of the governing process for Web development because it needs to work. Good content can reduce phone call and e-mail inquiries from users (thereby freeing staff), drive desired user behaviors such as filling out online forms or applications, and communicate important attributes about your college or university to users. It’s important for content developers to consider how the visual presentation of information affects user behavior and to monitor how the presentation affects user traffic. For example, we’ve discovered that packaging student profiles and testimonials in one type of navigation system is more successful than another type.

Once new content has been developed for the site, we remind stakeholders of the time and money that have been invested in the content and how important it is to keep it up-to-date. We often work with our clients to develop maintenance plans and to select tools—from sophisticated content management systems to simple Web page editors—that will empower them to create and maintain Web content. It’s also important to note that our content maintenance plans and tool recommendations are developed for content creators, not for the IT staff. By the end of our projects, we will have identified the people who will be responsible for maintaining and developing content, and we want them to have the confidence to do their jobs.

7. Inviting Widespread Communication and Involvement

For Web projects to be truly successful, they cannot occur in a vacuum. In recounting the numerous Web sites we've completed for Indiana University's campuses, schools, departments, and offices, we've found that the most successful projects are those that involve everyone on campus—from the departmental secretaries to the faculty to the recycling facility coordinator to the president, chancellor, or dean. When constituents on campus or within a school, department, or office are informed of the stakeholders' decision to redesign the existing Web site, they are eager to share their ideas and opinions. By getting people involved instead of taking away their academic rights to create Web pages, participants are much more likely to embrace the efforts and investment of a Web site redesign project.

CONCLUSION

By incorporating these seven ingredients into the Web development process, it is possible to build a Web site that everyone loves and stop the fighting. With the high interest the Internet has received in the past ten years, it's no wonder that enterprising university faculty and staff members have staked out their territory. Without their efforts, universities and colleges would not have been among the first organizations to have a Web presence. But as the Web has developed into a more sophisticated and relied upon communications channel, it's critical for university leaders to see that their Web site is too important to grow in a free-form fashion. With careful cultivation and direction of marketing/communications and IT departments, it's possible for university leaders to take back their Web presence and direct it in ways that will help their institutions flourish.

CASE STUDIES: EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL BUILT-BY-CONSENSUS WEB SITES

IU Bloomington Department of Chemistry

The original Department of Chemistry Web site was very text heavy with poor navigation and a few poor-quality photos. The navigation was especially problematic because it was difficult for users to understand the logic behind it. (Figure 1) Overall, the site was not professional looking and was admittedly not impressive to prospective students and faculty.

The stakeholders for the project were composed of faculty and IT staff members. The stakeholders identified the primary target audience as prospective students, especially graduate students. Other audiences included current students, prospective and current faculty, peer institutions, and employers. They wanted their Web site to look more sophisticated and to be at the same level as peer institutions. They requested that the design reflect "extreme chemistry" and that the focus of the home page should be on graduate recruitment. In addition, they wanted the home page to convey all the exciting and important research being conducted in their state-of-the-art facilities.

We hired a professional photographer to shoot all the feature photos for the home page. These rotate daily but all of them convey a message about graduate research and link to the graduate recruitment section of the site. We also designed a "spotlight" area where the department can

feature current research, new faculty hires, faculty awards, and more. In addition, the home page includes an area listing public lectures and seminars and events to convey the dynamic nature of the department. (Figure 2)

IU Bloomington School of Music

The prestigious IU School of Music approached us with a big problem: their Web site was very bland. Not only did it not convey the world-class character of the school, but it also did not communicate the multitude of performances and activities that were going on at any given time. The primary navigation was built with graphics that no one within the school was capable of changing. As a result, the look and feel of the Web site never changed, so users thought it was never updated. (Figure 3)

The School of Music Web committee stakeholders told us they wanted to convey through the new Web site the rich history and superb music education and performance opportunities that await students. The stakeholders also wanted us to develop a Web site that provided clear, straightforward information to its many users, including prospective and current students, music lovers, visiting and current faculty, prospective faculty, alumni, and donors. The School of Music's administrators requested lots of very dynamic and sophisticated features. Yet, the site could not exceed the skills of the Webmaster for the school and had to stay within a small budget.

The new design actually created a virtual personality or brand for the school that did not previously exist. (Figure 4). Key additions to the Web site included a faculty profile database; new subsites for admissions, alumni, and events; an audio player; and a Flash timeline and virtual tour.

IU South Bend

The IU South Bend chancellor asked us to develop a new site for the campus shortly after she was installed in office. She had tried to use the site when she was interviewing with the campus and had found it to be very difficult to use with poor navigation throughout, outdated content, and a general lack of content. In addition, it was not leveraging the Indiana University brand nor was it visually showing the vitality of that campus. (Figure 5)

The stakeholders (the chancellor, her cabinet, and several faculty and staff members) requested a stronger visual tie to the Indiana University brand, the use of more engaging photography, a dynamic events calendar, and improved navigation and content.

The IU Web team built more than 2,000 HTML files and nearly 4,000 total files including graphics and style sheets. The new site features rotating campus photos on the home page, a campus tour, and a unique subsite devoted to academic majors and programs. (Figure 6)

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