CONTENT IS KING

A. Cemal Ekin

The secret behind many successful Web sites is the content they organize and offer. There are many "good looking" sites on the Web with either nothing to offer or have something to offer but torture the visitor while getting it. In order to share information we must first have it and it must be useful to at least a group of visitors. It is important to remember that this is not a comparative judgement of the value of information. What may be of great interest to someone may be absolutely useless to another. In developing the content and organizing it for the Web, content owners need to keep the following issues in front of them.

Know the purpose of the information. Information is useful to the extent that it enhances the users' life in some form. This may be an overt or covert enhancement but information must somehow create a value. Anyone wishing to offer information on the Web needs to articulate the purpose of the information. Will it entertain, will it educate, will it locate other information or will it share information that will otherwise be useful? The anticipated Web site will emerge around this purpose and many of its other design features may be influenced by this purpose. So, the better we articulate the purpose of the information the better the site will be.

Know the audience. The qualities of the expected visitors to a site and what they are likely to expect when they arrive are critically important in developing and organizing the content. For instance,

there are many Web sites that offer information on various kinds of pens. Some of these sites are decidedly better for experienced collectors while others are excellent sources of information for beginning collectors or casual users. Given the strategic necessity and sufficient resources, it is certainly possible to design a pen site that will cater to all kinds of visitors. Now the challenge grows. We may bore a seasoned collector with information on how to fill a fountain pen, which may, on the other hand, be very useful to someone just beginning to enjoy writing with ink. Thus, the site must carefully organize information using a scheme that makes it accessible in the manner expected.

Know the nature of information. Some information we access (or publish) has an intrinsic structure. Regardless of the bases of this structure, the user expects to access and use it with that structure in mind. Class rosters, and student or faculty directories offer one type of structure: alphabetical. Maps, directions to places have another type: geographical. There may also be a chronological, event-based or other kind of information structure. Users expect to access this information with this structure in mind. On the other hand, we would like to have access to information that may not have any formal structure. In fact, a formal structure may even interfere with the use of the information. For instance, the Web site for the respected cooking magazine Cook's Illustrated offers "Quick Tips" at its Web site which are anything but quick. The problem is that they failed to see the ambiguous nature of the need and organized it chronologically on an issue-based manner, rendering it useless for someone trying to find a solution.

Create or add value with the information. On the Web, users have come to realize that they have more control on many things than they have in the real world. When a user comes to a site, he or she expects

to find information that is "useful." Just as repeat-customers are important in the real world, repeat-visits have the same importance on the Web, perhaps even more so. What inspires visitors to keep coming back repeatedly is compelling content. If the user does not see any value in the information or the service offered at a site, he or she will not return.

Use natural language. Many Web sites throw a bunch of jargon at visitors. "Click here," "open a new window," "get the plugin" and so on have become standard fare at many sites. Now, these are neither bad nor incorrect practices, but they simply may not be part of the visitors' frame of reference. We have been using the Web for only six years or so. Until then, we used other media like books, journals, magazines and other printed material, television or radio as our information source. None of these required us to "click" somewhere to turn the page or scroll our eyes down. Using proper English (or any other language for that matter) should be part of the requirements of building a good Web site.

Evaluate the content from the users' point of view. The reason someone may want to publish information on the Web is because either they are interested in it or they know a lot about it. Consequently, the written material may make eminent sense to them. However, a Web site should serve users other than the publisher. Therefore, the content and its level of writing have to make sense to the visitors. Often this is overlooked at a web site which ends up offering cryptic information, laden with jargon and poorly written to boot.

Next time, we will explore usability that may enhance or hinder users' experience at a Web site.

For more information, visit the following sites:

InkSpot: http://www.inkspot.com/ (No longer accessible in 2003)

WordBiz: http://www.wordbiz.com/

WordsWork: http://www.wordswork.com/

This Editor's Choice column originally appeared on October 2, 1999 on CourseLinks Marketing on the Internet section the content of which was maintained by the author