Webmasters’ Roundtable

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1 Cast and Crew

Perhaps the Roundtable would like to discuss the people involved in using and providing web–based information services. Here are a few individual roles and groups that come to mind:

the audience does your web address end–user needs, level of net literacy, and establish a relationship of continuous feedback?

the critics are your web site features well–presented and easy for reviewers and critics to write about?

content producers stakeholders, departments. Do they have realistic expectations of the web site and audience? Do you offer them continuing Internet education?

executive producers how are you evaluating web use and reporting return on investment in your web project?

contractors and vendors how do you manage in–house and outsourced work to deliver your projects on time, under budget, and remain friends with everyone?

the director webmeister, master, mistress, librarian, you. How are you holding up in an overloaded, underpaid role?

2 Process

Adopting a process for web projects can provide the missing link that unites multiple departments, contractors, and political interests in the common goal of improving networked information services. Some of our Roundtable conversation may turn to the process used to guide various library web projects:

research target audiences, their online behavior, estimated web use, cost, hosting requirements, competitive intelligence, and other strategic planning. Define target audience, project goals, and user scenarios.

design preliminary design iterations to address user scenarios and other require-
ments through discount usability engineering.

development may involve decisions of “in-house versus outsource,” RFP and vendor selection, defining standards and monitoring compliance, other project management.

testing for cross-platform browsing, speed, attention to detail, stress testing as appropriate.

marketing launch & promotion, user education and tutorials, contests, search engine registration, direct email, link development.

evaluation positive user contact and continual refinement based on emerging understanding of your audience. Measurement and reporting of progress towards goals.

evolution process for ongoing content development, which may include version control, automated site staging and updates.

3 Technologies

Technology tends to attract an unfair share of attention throughout all phases of the web project life cycle. Technology should be carefully evaluated in terms of human information needs and not implemented “because its there!” Technologies of interest to our Roundtable discussion of library web projects may include:

web server software apache and friends.

SSl servers for extranet and commerce applications

modules & middleware options for server–side scripting, SQL database integration, user authentication and tracking

SQL databases pros and cons of database-enabled web sites. High–performance SQL on a budget

add-on services Email lists, threaded discussions, dedicated web/Java applications, reporting and analysis of web site use

high availability caching, load balancing, RAIDS, security, staying online in the face of natural and net disasters

hardware & platform decisions criteria for machine, OS selection and support

network & hosting do you park a web server in–house? rent shared space with an ISP? “co–locate” in a hosting facility?

version control maintain and stage multiple variations of your site, roll back mistakes, automate content updates http://durak.org/cvswebsites/

4 Issues

With all these people and processes, challenging issues are bound to arise on any web project. Here are several that may be of interest for our discussion:

expectations do stakeholders suffer from delusions of web grandeur or other misguided expectations?

budget it is too small. it was too small before you started

time project life cycles are shorter and shorter

design model top down? bottom up? huh?

politics egos and agendas flying every which way
5 Case Studies

Following are some commercial, government, nonprofit, and academic W^3 projects from my work with SavvySearch, Inter@ctive Consulting Group and the University of California. These may be relevant examples for our Roundtable discussion. Questions about these projects are welcome at any time before/during/after the ILI conference.

SavvySearch metasearch engine. Serving information seekers (both professional and casual) since 1995. Provides single point of access to 200 search engines via special collections based on topic, or product (comparison shopping). Presently serving 15 million raw hits per month (impressions N/A). http://www.savvysearch.com/

San Diego Padres professional baseball club. Site serves the media, fans, and voters. Business goals include: sale of merchandise & tickets, fan relations, and club information. Serves 2 million raw hits per month (650,000 page views) in the off season. http://www.padres.com/

Zoological Society of San Diego the “World Famous San Diego Zoo” serves diverse audience of students, educators, zoology researchers, and tourists—each with their own unique information needs. Business goals include membership, customer relations, presence and call reduction. Society servers handle 3 million raw hits per month (300,000 page views). http://www.sandiegozoo.org/

California Avocado Commission ambitious site by a US agricultural commission. Serves consumers, retailers, growers to accomplish branding, consumer and industry education, retailer support, merchandising. Features several unique intranet applications for avocado growers. http://www.avocado.org/

Workforce Partnership regional one-stop service assist job seekers with career development and job-placement; employers with recruiting, training, and outplacement needs. Grant–funded project with extensive back–end labor market information database. http://www.workforce.org/

Academic Projects Medicine Meets Virtual Reality IV online conference center for the annual telemedicine gathering. BITMed, the Biological Informatics and Theoretical Medicine project serving medical and AI researchers with simulator called CyberMouse, funded by an NSF grant. Early (1994/95) web sites for the University of California at San Diego—Muir College and the Department of Mathematics.

6 Speaker Bio

Education BA in visual art media from the University of California, San Diego. MLIS with specializations in information systems and information access from the University of California Los Angeles.

Work University of California: Internet instructor, academic computing specialist and network administrator. Founded Kensho, a consultancy for Internet research, education, and marketing in 1995. Joined Inter@ctive Consulting Group as director of research & intelligence in December 1996. Presently dedicated to the commercial success of SavvySearch.

Additional Information Professional and personal URL: http://durak.org/sean/ Notes from this conference available: http://durak.org/sean/pubs/ili/