

## ***Business Value: the touchstone of web site improvement***

Web site redesign meetings can be challenging, particularly in large organizations with complex web sites. Different stakeholders, representing different organizational interests, discuss, debate or argue over the aesthetic designs before them. Everyone is willing to express her or his personal likes and dislikes, but intermingled with the aesthetic discussion are parochial business interests that often are covert.

All organizations have internal conflicts that are tolerated through implicit maintenance of blind spots and ambiguity. The conflicting stakeholders support the illusion of coherence this ambiguity provides, because all sides fear the resolution may work against their own objectives. Better to let sleeping dogs alone than wake them and find out they are not friendly.

Which brings us to the problem of web site improvement. Many practices that reduce web site effectiveness are a reflection of these unresolved internal business conflicts rather than a lack of understanding of good web practices. The ambiguities that maintain organizational coexistence must either be resolved or reflected in the web site. There is no way to hide them.

Of all the web site effectiveness issues, ambiguity and omission are the biggest barriers for most web site visitors. When ignorance or oversight causes these problems, they can be fixed through awareness and education. When the problems are caused by organizational ambiguity, they can only be fixed by first resolving the business issues.

This is why many redesign meetings can be so challenging. The participants use aesthetic design and feature arguments to try to win the case for their position on deeper business or personal issues. When this happens it is time to step back and make the conflicting business objectives explicit by abandoning the aesthetic design arguments and focusing on business value.

### **First agree on what you are trying to achieve**

When a disagreement arises over a feature like rollover menus or a design object like a large graphic, refocus the discussion away from the feature or object and first reach agreement on the business value and business objectives you are trying to achieve with the site. Only after explicit agreement is reached on the business value and objectives should the participants return to a discussion of the design issue at hand. But now, the facilitator should keep the design issue focused on whether the feature or object under discussion is the best way to achieve the agreed upon business objective in the web medium.

If the process is at the stage where aesthetic design options are being evaluated, then there likely is at least one documented business objective somewhere. Most design firms have a questionnaire and one of the questions is usually: What is the business objective

for this site? There are three problems to watch for with objectives obtained in this manner:

1. They are too generic to be useful, for example: “sell our products online” or “enhance our image.” Objectives need metrics to show value.
2. They are incomplete and do not include the key objectives for all the stakeholders. Many disagreements are over whose business objectives are being satisfied.
3. They do not align with the overall business objectives for the company. Executives measure value against their business objectives.

During a design disagreement, it is important to keep in mind that the web site has to balance and support multiple business and visitor objectives. This means that if the issue is one of balancing objectives, the first step in the resolution process needs to focus on getting the stakeholders to embrace an *AND* solution rather than an *OR* solution. How can we support this objective *AND* the other key objectives?

It is no coincidence that design disagreements often focus on the home page. This is where the visitor first sees the options and chooses a path into the site. We have found in our workshops that web site home page design exercises provide an effective structure for resolving general business focus and organizational ambiguity issues that go beyond the web site. The home page provides a tangible mirror of the struggles among various parts of the company over strategy, priority and value.

Constructing a home page exercise is quite simple. It involves getting the group of web site business owners to agree on how the web site home page should be organized – what is included and what is emphasized. In tangible terms this is the identification of the categories and links that appear on the home page and the links that form the persistent or global navigation. Even unguided, the discussion moves to overall business strategy and objectives in the attempt to reach resolution.

Business value and business objectives provide a touchstone that brings most design disagreements back to solid ground. While there are design elements that legitimately involve emotional preference, the business value focus makes sure that these elements enhance the business objectives rather than mask them.

### **Recommendations for reaching agreement on web site designs**

1. Conduct a formal process that includes all the stakeholders and helps them identify, agree on, and document the business objectives for the site as the *first* step in the design process.
2. Have the stakeholders identify, agree on, and document the home page and global navigation categories and links *before* the aesthetic design commences.

3. When an impasse or heated argument arises during a design review, move the focus back to the business objectives, and don't come back to design features or objects until agreement on the business objectives has been re-established.
4. Once agreement on business objectives has been re-established, keep discussions on how best to meet the business objectives in the web medium focused on objective research, on making assumptions explicit, and on how differing assumptions can be tested.

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