

Getting Web developers to wear sensible shoes: working with developers to create online user services

Shannon Robalino

Knowledge & Information Services Manager, South East Public Health Observatory

shannon.robalino@sepho.nhs.uk or shannon.robalino@gmail.com

Librarian involvement with the design of Web sites for the Public Health Observatories.

For years now we, as librarians, have had to become more familiar with the workings of our electronic resources and Internet presence. We have all probably been through at least one major redesign of our library Web sites. Often we are asked to work alongside professional designers and developers who seemingly speak a different language and expect all users to be as tech-savvy as they are – as we all know, this is not the case.

Background

Over the last 3 years, a consortium of Public Health Observatories (PHOs) in England have been involved in taking a resource management system (RMS), initially designed for use by a single observatory, and making it a core system for use across PHOs in the UK and Ireland, should they want to use it. The system operates as an RMS for documents, events, news, etc. in addition to supplying 'static' content such as overviews on public health topics and publication lists.

The project involved three groups – the Project Board made up of directors from the PHOs, the Design Team made up of the PHO Web developers and myself, and the third party Web developers. The Design Team was made up almost entirely of Web developers with me and another part-time colleague being the only members to have an information science background and work experience.

My role was to focus on the usability of the RMS and re-design the South East Public Health Observatory (SEPHO) Web site <www.sepho.org.uk> so that it was easy to navigate. I also provided

insight into how users approach searching in terms of methodology and expectations of search results.

How-to do it

Opinions of users

As a consortium, we developed a survey together, but undertook the survey individually. We asked our users their opinions about the current Web site and what they wanted from the Web site. We knew where problems existed in the current RMS and Web-site design, but we chose to conduct the survey so we could have

concrete results from users about what was wrong and how we could improve the Web site overall. The results were not surprising; we had lost a lot of users due to poor usability and poor search results. This meant that I was going to have to find a way to win users back.

Advice from peers

As I work in relative isolation from the actual end-users, I sought advice from my peers who work with those users on a day-to-day basis. What types of technology do the users have access to (e.g. connection type, age of machines, frequency of access)? What do the users look for? How technology-savvy are the users? Knowing who the users are, what they are after, and how they get the information is vital.

Examples of usability – good and bad

There are Web sites we all visit on a daily or weekly basis and, generally, there are things we find both good and bad about the way the site looks and operates. These are important aspects in redesigning your own site when you are working with a Web designer and developer. We asked our users which sites they liked and disliked, and why, and took examples from those as well as sites that personally appealed to staff at SEPHO. Don't forget to include elements of design that are bad! Knowing what these elements are and why they don't suit your site is helpful for the developer so they can

The system operates as an RMS for documents, events, news, etc. in addition to supplying 'static' content such as overviews on public health topics and publication lists.

avoid building components that look and work like an element that is unsuitable. This avoids lost time and money for both your organisation and the developer.

Jakob Nielsen is considered an expert in the field of usability and produces a column called Alertbox¹ which focuses on usability issues. His column and Web site include both good and bad examples of usability. His first column on corporate usability maturity² includes several important lessons on working with developers. If you often find yourself in charge of Web site design and structure, subscribing to these columns is worthwhile.

Learn a bit of geekery

If you are involved with your organisation's Web site and database, you

He@lth Information on the Internet

probably have a better understanding of technology than the average person, yet it is quite easy to get lost in the language of developers. Learn some basics about how things work. How is the data retrieved? How are resources ranked and displayed after a search? You do not have to understand the fine details of the technologies, but you should not be afraid to ask about a concept or term you don't understand. I often found that other members within the Design

versus an advanced search. They came up with all the usual searches such as AND, OR, and NOT, but they also were quite determined to include a function for AND NOT and OR NOT which seemed baffling. Talking through this with them, it was quite easy to dissuade them from using AND NOT since that is the same as NOT, but OR NOT was a bit more difficult. In the end, they didn't include a function to search using OR NOT, at least not visible to

not to make your dream search engine or site design – because at this point it will be very costly, and nearly impossible, to make big changes.

Just remember that to have a well-designed product requires input from a number of different experts and a library Web site is no different. You may not have the skills to build an RMS from scratch or redesign the library Web site, but you know how users use the system and what they expect better than any developer can – they need you as much as you need them.

We asked our users their opinions about the current Web site and what they wanted from the Web site.

Team had the same questions as I did because the technology being implemented was outside their area of expertise.

Offer your expertise

While many of the discussions were over my head technically, I could offer my expertise in terms of how users perform searches, navigate Web sites, which metadata items were more critical than others, etc. This information proved very helpful in a number of discussions.

For example, when discussing the search engine, the developers needed to determine the various Boolean search methods a user might employ if they were to use a free-text entry

users (but it may exist in the code), since I was able to convince them that this is a very unlikely scenario.

However, the reality is that not every battle will be won so it is important to choose the battles carefully and present the evidence as to why your idea is the best approach – you are the expert in the field!

Does this work?

Yes it does! In the end we got five well-functioning Web sites because we had a diverse range of skills available. By applying our different areas of expertise, we have created a network where we can go to get advice or assistance in areas where our own skills fall short. I was able to write the help and searching FAQs that have been used on all five Web sites, but required assistance with creating and implementing an online request form from one of the other observatories since I do not have the required coding skills.

What should you do?

Get involved the minute you hear about the Web site being redesigned and overhauled – even if it is just a scoping exercise. If you are involved from the start, including writing specifications, you can have a greater influence on what is done and how it is done. If you wait until the developers come to your doorstep with a beta version, it is too late. They are there to show you the finished product and work out any bugs in the system –

Note:

This article is based on a presentation of the same name I gave at the Health Libraries Group Conference in July 2006.

References

1. Nielsen J. Alertbox. www.useit.com/alertbox/.
2. Nielsen J. Corporate Usability Maturity, Stages 1–4. 2006. www.useit.com/alertbox/maturity.html.

Health events calendar 2007

www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidanceArticle/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4122576&chk=58vsPf

This calendar, produced by COI for the Department of Health, provides a list of health promotion events and awareness days and weeks. Available as a PDF.

Training in Internet skills

Intute has released three new Internet tutorials for the Health and Life Sciences in the **VIRTUAL TRAINING SUITE:**

Internet for Health and Social Care www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/health

Internet for Biosciences www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/biosciences

Internet for Veterinary Medicine www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/vet

The tutorials teach Internet research and information literacy skills and are aimed at students and staff in UK universities and colleges. They are 'free' to access on the Web and take around an hour each to complete.