

Editing on the Web: From the Text to the Screen

Panelists:

Carol Cadmus

Cadmus Editorial Services
Ridgewood, New Jersey

Wendy Meyeroff

WM Medical Communications
Brooklyn, New York

Thomas Gegeny

The Center for AIDS: Hope and
Remembrance Project
Houston, Texas

Reporter:

Anne Mattison

Logicon/ROW Sciences
Rockville, Maryland

Electronic publishing has changed editors' roles, but their commitment to readers and effective communication are needed now more than ever before, as the panelists in this session demonstrated.

Carol Cadmus, life-sciences writer and editor, reviewed the design and content of several sites from a Web novice's perspective.

- Medline (www.nlm.nih.gov) is a classic example of a well-designed site. Search PubMed does not require registration.
- PDRNet (www.pdr.net) is the online Physicians' Desk Reference and requires a one-time registration. Technical glitches can require reregistration. Cadmus noted that the latest information on a drug is usually best obtained from the manufacturer's Web site.
- Medscape (www.medscape.com) provides examples of frustrating aspects of the Web: registration requires both personal and professional information, and, with over 30 headings and 150 options, the site's pages can be overwhelming.
- Reuters Health Information (www.reutershealth.com) offers ample

white space, high-quality writing, and reliable news.

- Praxis Press (www.praxis.md) has a well-written online magazine with good graphics.

Cadmus stressed that editors should remind Web designers that the basics of print design still apply to the Web: keep it simple with clean design and generous white space, don't overwhelm the user with too many typefaces and colors, don't do too much in too small a space.

Medical-communication consultant Wendy Meyeroff echoed Cadmus: "Don't let the techies intimidate you." Web developers can get "carried away" with the technology, losing the reader in the process. Just being able to do it doesn't mean you *should* do it.

Two mistakes that Meyeroff often sees in print-to-Web transfers are (1) slapping print content directly onto the screen without reconfiguring it, which results in long pages, and (2) creating pages with complicated graphics or too much animation—the "tap-dancing white cells" approach. Many site designers also do not consider the variations in users' browsers, screen sizes, and eyesight. As with print products, small type and busy design can make online reading difficult for the increasing number of older people using the Web. (See "Making Your Web Site Senior Friendly" at www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/checklist.pdf.)

Just being able to put large amounts of text up on the Web doesn't mean you *should*. Although you might have unlimited space, your reader does not necessarily have unlimited time, patience, modem speed, or print capacity. Meyeroff considers 1500 words to be the outer limit of a Web article. Try breaking up the text into an article of 600-700 words, with links to or sidebars on the remaining text.

Thomas Gegeny, editor at The Center for AIDS, offered additional tips on managing

and editing Web sites:

- First decide whether users are looking for an interactive, multimedia experience on your site or simply want to read or print out information. If it's the latter, offer the text both in HTML and as a portable document format (PDF) file. If your PDFs are large, save them as several smaller files to make them easier to handle.
- Make your Web pages scannable—use boldface, links, and so forth so that users can quickly get a sense of a page's content. Remember that managing Web content is like placing a book online for readers who have, under those conditions, attention spans more appropriate for TV.
- Use the inverted-pyramid approach, placing the most important information at the top of the page and the details below.
- Use a larger number of shorter pages instead of fewer long ones.
- Consider including a brief summary of an article before a link to the full text or PDF and a "printer-friendly" text version.
- Because users can enter a site almost anywhere, identify each page with headings and include navigational buttons at the top and bottom of the page. Pages should be designed so that a user can scroll vertically, not horizontally, through the content.
- Decrease the word count of pages whenever possible.

Gegeny recommended some online resources for Web writing and editing:

- www.sun.com/980713/webwriting
- info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents/html
- www.ecf.toronto.edu/~writing/e-media.htm
- www.writeonline.com/links.html
- www.open.gov.uk/webguide/wgs9.htm
- english.ttu.edu/dayton/

