

Redesigning Your Online Journal

Speakers:

Stewart Wills

Science

Washington, DC

Margaret A Winker

Journal of the American Medical Association

Chicago, Illinois

Reporter:

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College Station, Texas

Opening this session, which fell at the end of the annual meeting, Stewart Wills joked that he and fellow speaker Margaret Winker would be “playing to the haircuts” as people left. However, the audience remained engaged as Wills provided general advice on redesigning online journals and Winker presented a case study.

General Guidance

Points presented by Wills, online editor of *Science*, included the following:

Like that of a print journal, redesign of an online journal can be cosmetic, comprehensive, or, more often, in between. Redesigning an online journal presents special challenges, though, because of the technology, users’ shifting expectations, the continued evolution of Web “best practices”, questions of how print and online versions should relate, and organizational issues (in both senses).

Information to aid in redesigning an online journal can come from various forms of research:

- *Online Surveys*: Such surveys are inexpensive. To avoid losing respondents, limit the number of questions to about

15. Keep the questions closed-ended to facilitate analysis.

- *Analysis of Usage Statistics*: Among items to consider looking at are preferred search terms, most and least popular pages on the site, sites that users enter from, and clickstream data (information on paths taken through the site).
- *Qualitative Research*: Such research can include focus-group discussions and individual interviews. Subjects may be asked about their use of online resources in general and their perceptions of the online journal in question, and they may be shown the site and asked for critiques.
- *Expert Evaluation*: Experts may be shown the site and asked to evaluate it relative to “best practices”.
- *Usability Testing*: In such testing, users are asked to do basic tasks, roadblocks are identified, and users are debriefed. A population of five to 15 users suffices for such testing.

Information architecture of the online journal also should be evaluated. Aspects to consider include organizational hierarchy, labels, navigation, and searching. Also, the redesign should be considered in such contexts as business strategy, competition, financial constraints, and technologic constraints.

A Case Study

Winker, Web editor for the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Archives Journals* published by the association, discussed redesigning the Web site for these journals. The site became publicly available in 1999, and in 2003 the revamped site debuted. The redesign was done almost entirely in house with a team

consisting of Web director, Web designer, graphics editor, medical illustrator, and Web editor.

Difficulties with the old Web site included usability problems, lack of information hierarchy, failure to evoke the print version and so take advantage of branding, and a dated look. Movement to a new vendor and platform offered a logical opportunity for a redesign.

Usability testing of the old site drew on eight clinicians of varied technical background. Among the findings: the journal’s table of contents was hard to find, navigation was difficult, there was too much scrolling, the palette was too dark for easy reading, the extensive use of graphics slowed downloading too much, and the links for accessing PDF files were hard to locate.

Goals of the redesign were to evoke the uncrowded look of the journals, which had recently been redesigned; to include design elements from the print versions; to increase branding; to make it clearer that the journals were a family; to maximize screen space; and to provide easy searching and transparent navigation. The redesign went through a number of “drafts”, some of which Winker showed. Features of the redesign ultimately chosen included use of the color palettes of the journals.

The main lessons learned from the redesign were the following: Know your scope and goals. Treat internal designers as you would consultants (but give them time in lieu of money). Obtain input and feedback from key players, but don’t ask about every detail. Know your vendor’s limitations. And most important: maximize usability—and to do so, watch people use the site. 🗣️