



TechsmARTs Meeting Report January 25, 2011

The theme of the January 2011 TechsmARTs meeting was website evaluation. More specifically, the group discussed a few methods that organizations can use to evaluate their own websites and figure out which direction to proceed in tackling issues. Joe Winter, Chief Technology Officer for C4 Atlanta, led the discussion.

Joe began the discussion by asking everyone what comes to mind when they hear "Website Evaluation." What words or concepts come to mind? The following list summarizes the responses from participants:

- Aesthetically pleasing -- does the website look good?
- Ease of navigation -- can users browse and use the website easily?
- How to integrate new technologies -- can the website be kept up-to-date?
- Aligning organization's goals with demographics and making sure things are up-to-date on the website.
- Content is not stale. If content is stale, users will begin asking whether the organization is still alive.

The meeting continued with a quick survey to find out how much control each company exerts over its own website. In other words, are certain aspects of the organization's website managed by a staff member internally, or are those elements managed by a third party? And if those elements are managed by a third party, is that service paid for, or pro bono?

Four elements are relevant to the question of control: the company's domain name (for example, "c4atlanta.org"), the physical server hosting the website, the design, and the content. Most participants indicated through the survey that they maintained their own domain, design and content. All participants indicated that the physical server hosting their websites are outsourced. This is a normal setup for many small companies. Many times, a third party may create an initial design for a website, then the design is handed over to the company.

Joe continued the discussion by asking why it's important to the evaluation discussion to understand who is in control of these four elements of a website. The following list summarizes the responses from participants:

- You need to know where you are first before figuring out where you want to go.
- You can stay relevant, even through staff changes or board changes.
- Security is a big issue. What if someone outside the organization is the only person who knows how to update website content? What internal controls are in place to ensure the organization's web presence is protected and able to survive catastrophic changes in the organization? (The ArtsReady initiative is a very good resource to assist with contingency planning.)

Before evaluating a website, it's important to know the basic purposes of a website, and for an organization to establish for itself what goals it wants to accomplish through its website. For the sake of the discussion, Joe proposed a top-level list of purposes for everyone to consider:

- Provide information
- Gather information
- Facilitate transactions
- Facilitate mission fulfillment
- Strengthen company brand/image

More thorough and specific lists can be found on many websites by using your favorite search engine to search for "purpose of a website." Joe asked for additional suggestions that could go on the list. The following list summarizes the responses from participants:

- Targeting, serving demographics, specific audiences, and even psychographic targeting.
- A website can also facilitate all processes in an organization, internal and external, not just monetary transactions.
- Everything goes back to mission -- if the list could be whittled further down to a single item, this would be the single most important consideration.

Joe also provided a resource available at <http://7designavenue.com/2010/03/what-is-the-purpose-of-a-website>. This page offers a much longer list of purposes to consider when designing an internal process for website evaluation.

Joe then discussed three methods for website evaluation: the checklist method, the use case scenario, and do-it-yourself usability testing.

The checklist method involves creating checklists by which to subjectively evaluate the effectiveness of your website. Again, many checklists can be found throughout the internet. One simple search string, "evaluate website effectiveness" can yield many lengthy checklists that can be adapted for your organization in this process. One checklist in particular remains a very good resource, even if some of the content is out of date: <http://www.mcil.co.uk/review/7-site-review-homepage.htm>.

One major problem with the checklist method is that it is very time-intensive if it is adopted as a formal evaluation process. Also, there is an implication that a website should be more perfect than it needs to be. For example, Facebook would score very poorly against many of these

checklists, even though it is among the most popular websites in the world. The reason Facebook is popular is not because their website would score well against arbitrary checklists, but because they do a few things from these checklists very well.

Checklists are still useful because they offer a source for brainstorming ways to improve a website in ways both large and small. Just take the advice they offer with a grain of salt, and you can zip through long checklists and come out with some useful ideas at the end.

The use case scenario is a website evaluation method that is more tailored to an individual website. The basic idea is to create and run through a list of tasks you expect users to perform on your website. This is a goal-based scenario, where you can evaluate based both on your organization's goals, and the goals of site users. The basic questions to ask: how easy is it to accomplish the tasks laid out, and how can we make it easier to run through those tasks? A more detailed review of this method is available at <http://www.audiencedialogue.net/webeval.html>.

A third method for website evaluation is Do-It-Yourself Usability Testing. This method is described in detail in an easy-to-read book, called "[Rocket Surgery Made Easy](#)," by Steve Krug. This method is very much like the use case scenario, but more intensive. Rather than carrying out a use test yourself, have some volunteers run through the tasks and identify any problems they find along the way. After a few volunteers, you'll have a long list of issues to work through. Narrow that list down to the easiest problems to fix. Once you've fixed those problems, run through a new set of tests with new volunteers. The focus of this method is on making incremental changes from one cycle to the next.

In addition to these three methods of website evaluation, it's also important to consider the accessibility of your website. Mobile technologies and accommodations for the disabled make it important to discuss a few methods of evaluating your website for accessibility. The most important way to make your website accessible to more people is to ensure your site is coded according to web standards. These standards, developed by the World Wide Web Consortium, make it easier for a single website all users, no matter what browser or device they use.

Web standards are easier for machines to interpret. Search engines are better able to interpret the content on your website. Therefore, sites that adhere to web standards are more likely to appear "above the fold" in relevant search results. Older browsers are also better able to understand standards-compliant code. Ultimately, not adhering to web standards means restricting access to your website from some people.

To check on your website's compliance, the World Wide Web consortium has an automated tool available at <http://validator.w3.org>. This tool will list out any errors it is able to detect on any web page on your website.

After discussing web standards, the group discussed a list of possible questions to ask a website

designer or programmer, if the need to hire one arises. The questions purposefully did not focus on the capabilities of the designer (e.g., "Do you follow web standards? Can you be flexible?"). Some questions were focused on figuring out the attitudes of the web designer, while others were focused on the designer's ability to work with the client and offer creative solutions to problems that may arise along the way. More potential questions can also be found using the search string, "questions for web designer interview."

In addition to the questions presented, one participant suggested adding a question about the designer's process to ensure the company's website is kept up-to-date. Will there be add-on hourly fees, or a maintenance contract?

To conclude the discussion, Joe presented a list of additional resources. Participants also engaged in a discussion of some other tips for evaluating websites. One participant pointed out the importance of having contact information clearly available on your organization's website. Another participant suggested that, with more people using mobile browsers, it would be prudent when designing a new website to begin your website's design with mobile browsing in mind.

At the end of the discussion, Joe asked participants if there were any other topics that should be discussed at future TechsmARTs events. The following list summarizes the responses from participants:

- How to approach meta tagging
- Going mobile
- Video production

A representative from the National Black Arts Festival offered to discuss her organization's mobile project, and a decision was made to go ahead and make that the topic for the March TechsmARTs gathering.

The next TechsmARTs gathering will be held at noon on Monday, February 21 at PushPush Theater. MailChimp's Amy Ellis will give a presentation on creating a communications ecosystem across email and social media.