

Building a Community Website

SIGCHI.NL Goes Online

How do you Build the Perfect Website?

SIGCHI.NL, the Dutch local SIG, decided in its first member meeting of January 1998 that most, if not all, communication to and between members should take place electronically. This also meant that the website should play a vital role in supporting the local HCI community. The newly appointed website committee was given the tough job of building the perfect website for an opinionated audience of 500 usability experts.

How We Did It...

The existing website had been created to promote the SIG's kick-off conference. It was basically one long homepage on a virtual server with links to some longer articles in the body. It was formatted with the Web Meta Language [1] toolkit and a CSS stylesheet [2].

The new website was designed by a subset of the committee due to the summer holiday season. It was built in stages: First a product plan, then a mock-up, and graphic design, some prototypes and a final version for publication.

Product Plan

A functional design was written by analysing all possible pieces of content, grouping them, and identifying the actions visitors would likely want to perform. This resulted in a product plan which presented the information structure for the website. The site would feature news items, backgrounders on HCI and the SIGCHI organisation, a member section, education and research resources, information for practitioners and an English summary.

Since SIGCHI.NL's objective was to publish a monthly electronic newsletter for its members and interested others, the input for the news section

would be no problem. Committees would have to contribute and update the information for other sections.

Mock-up

We took the information and navigation structure a step further and designed an overall concept for the site. A basic lay-out was chosen. A navigation bar on the left would identify the eight main sections and show the current selection. A column on the righthand side of the page was intended for little boxes containing direct links to interesting pages deeper in the site. The midsection was intended for the content and has room for a banner at the top.

There is no 'real' homepage in the traditional sense. We decided to put the most interesting and most dynamic items on the homepage: The news bulletin and the calendar of activities along with some noteworthy facts like a continually updated member count and number of jobs posted.

This structural design supports the 'pyramid' model for websites which is advocated by Jakob Nielsen, among others. At the very top of the site the information is intended to be concise and scannable. To support this the links on the righthand side allow users to quickly scan for more interesting or related information at the same or at a deeper level. At the deeper levels the content becomes more detailed and larger. We are not using frames to allow users to easily print large pieces of content for more comfortable reading.

A non-functional, HTML mock-up was created to illustrate this concept. It featured a homepage with dummy news-items, and a short-term agenda. Four more pages were created to see how the navigation would hold on section, subsection, and content pages.

Graphic Design

The team of design professionals and students also did the graphic design, featuring a new logo, color combinations we could use, and font types and sizes for headings and text. Several designs were presented at an executive committee (EC) meeting to allow an opinionated, informed decision. The result was that text would be black on white, the navigational area would consist of black section names on an orange background (orange is the national color of the Netherlands), and black on light-purple for the supporting boxes on the right.

To allow for easier selection, the section names were done in lightweight graphics with a 'mouse-over' effect that changed the font into an OCR-type. This was a tough decision since web-usability guidelines say that images should not be used for displaying text.

Prototypes

The team collected the available content and combined it with the approved graphic design into a second prototype. As soon as two or three pages were ready, the URL of this prototype was communicated to active members (SIGCHI.NL operates a mailing list for these purposes), asking for comments. While these comments came in, a third prototype was set up, one where more content was added, and new features were tested. Problems with navigation on a deeper level were solved, and the first interactive pages were created: Fill-out forms, a search feature, and a discussion forum. A list of missing content was distributed to

committees. The contributions that followed were included into the prototype, or a short text describing the planned content was written and put in place.

Presentation

Two days before the second SIG-CHI.NL conference on September 7, 1998, the last changes were made, and a fourth version of the site was created, and tuned for off-line presentation. This fourth prototype was ZIPped (two copies, just to be sure) and taken to the conference. During the presentation we used the old prototype with some new, appropriate texts as an introduction and as a tension builder to the grand opening of the new SIG-CHI.NL site. The site itself was approved by the member meeting and placed on-line a few days later [3].

How You Should Do It...

Our efforts have paid off: The website is on-line and gets visited by 20-100 people per day (<http://analyze> [4], our statistical package, says "user sessions") without any real promotion. We have made some changes to the structure and layout, and new content is delivered by committees on a monthly basis. Here is what we feel worked well when designing and building the website.

Rapid Prototyping

Publishing prototypes to evoke comments and point committees to missing contents seems a successful approach. It took our team a week (in the holiday season) to gather content that would probably have taken months to gather if the empty pages were not made visible.

Surgical Team

Even though the SIG as a whole can reach its membership by email and news items on a website, some activities are best performed by meeting face-to-face. SIGCHI.NL provides public EC meetings, and monthly thematic evenings to support this kind of contact. We used just one face-to-face meeting to generate enough momentum to build a new website in a few weeks. We worked like the classic Surgical Team [5]: One team member does the cutting and the others give

support that will enhance effectiveness and productivity.

Support = Interactivity

The objective of the SIGCHI.NL website is to support the Dutch HCI community and the local SIG itself. Supporting the community involves creating discussion forums, job banks, rooms for business cases and ways to comment on them. Supporting the SIG committees involves creating password-protected areas where internal reports and documentation can be stored, as well as public pages that can be updated by the committees themselves. Since we deliberately did not design the website to reflect the SIG's organizational chart, committees will have to update several parts in different sections of the website, sometimes together with other committees.

Supporting a community and a SIG means adding interactivity to a website. Unfortunately in today's world this means choosing a hardware and associated software platform. This narrows down options to quickly add new functionality that is based on a different platform. The intention is to keep all the pages on our own server to stay independent of internet accounts of individual members.

Updates

The proposed monthly updates by committees (as well as those by the web committee) are a source of constant worry and discussion: What techniques should we use? What policies and procedures do we have to set up? Who is responsible for the content?

The main question is where to put the intelligence: In the update module or in the head of the updater? The first option calls for a publishing system with lots of integrity checks, and automatically generated webpages. The second option requires an open update system, where updaters can change every page where they feel it is necessary, meanwhile enforcing the necessary layout and navigational rules.

The webteam is, and will be for some time, in the process of defining, designing, implementing, evaluating, and refining the desired functionality.

A future article will have to tell which decisions have been made, and whether we have been successful in designing the perfect website.

References

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- [2] W3C, *Web Style Sheets*, <http://www.w3c.org/Style/>
- [3] SIGCHI.NL, *website*, <http://sigchi.nl/>
- [4] Rent-A-Guru®, *http-analyze*, <http://www.netstore.de/Supply/http-analyze/>
- [5] Brooks, F. P., *"The Mythical Man-Month. Essays on Software Engineering"*, Addison Wesley, Reading, Ma, 1995 (Anniversary Edition)

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About the Author

Peter Boersma has a Master's degree in Information Ergonomics from Twente University, The Netherlands, and currently works as an information architect for General Design internet solutions. He worked on the CHI 97 Hypermedia Committee, and is a member of SIGCHI.NL's web committee.

Author's Address

Peter Boersma
General Design, Matrix Building
Kruislaan 419,
1098 VA Amsterdam
The Netherlands
email: peter@design.nl
Tel: +31-20-663 7769