GECKO: Framework for restructuring WWW.PLAINLANGUAGE.GOV

Background

The website www.plainlanguage.gov was developed to transfer knowledge of Plain Language in Federal writing to others who believed in clarity in writing. But the 1996-era site proved increasingly difficult for users to find the content they wanted. The site required more structure – a better "information architecture." Information architects work to meet the goal of "making the complex clear." In today's web environment, that goal means crafting a user-focused structure to help a site effectively meet its mission.

Process

Information Architecture students followed a process for getting to understand web users and how to organize content with the users in mind. The process requires the information architects to gather information on audiences, the audiences' purposes for "using" the Web Site, and the context (environment) in which users are trying to complete their work.

Because information architecture work provides many discrete tasks, Thom Haller (information architecture teacher who facilitated the reshaping www.plainlanguage.gov) explains them in a framework he calls **GECKO** (gathering, evaluating, chunking, "knowing" and optimizing).

Gathering Information –The first step in developing a web site required learning about how users reacted to the old web site. Thom began some early analysis using a team of students from Johns Hopkins University. Hopkins students gathered information from stakeholders, potential users, and others. They analyzed the former site using heuristics (rules of thumb) and helped the client envision how a new site might be structured to better support users. Students evaluated the content relationships in the previous site and identified needs for additional content by listing audiences and tasks (what they wanted to do on the site). Thom presented the findings in December 2003 to the client, the Plain Language Action and Information Network. He and staff from Info.Design, Inc. then assembled information into a planning document that they presented to the client. After some refinement, this planning document served as the basis for the next phase of work, performed by the USDA Information Architecture (IA) class.

Evaluating content – Students in the USDA IA class and a volunteer team evaluated the content on the 1996 site. They noted the need for additional content by paying attention to audience needs and measures of success. The class viewed this content "through the eyes" of actual users by interviewing members of distinct user groups and by building personas as a tool for envisioning content through others' eyes.

Chunking content – To organize the content into clusters, volunteers inventoried the current content and the class conducted card sorts. They organized task information they had gathered from interviews and built content groupings based on what users wanted to do. The class and volunteers began to envision how content might be arranged in a Web environment and developed rough prototypes for testing.

"Knowing content" -- Knowing how users think is essential in developing web structure and the class and volunteers developed increasingly complex prototypes for user testing. Test subjects provided feedback at three stages of prototyping -- rough paper prototypes, detailed paper prototypes, and design mockups. Based on feedback, site structure evolved into the current structure, visually articulated by volunteer information designer Elaine Montambeau.

Optimizing content– With our audiences and purposes in mind, Annetta Cheek, (principal spokesperson for PLAIN) collected content from more than 20 different writers. Annetta worked with project managers and content team members – all participants in the USDA Class who continued with the project beyond the end of the 10-week term. Near the end of the project, volunteers revisited the measures of success identified at the beginning of the project and made changes in structure and added additional "linked" relationships. Prior to launch, the team conducted summative testing, incorporated lessons learned, and focused on improving performance of those individuals entering the site.

The Result

The revised and redesigned site has sections on the history of the plain language movement, definitions of plain language, quick references, before and after examples, tips on starting a plain language program in your agency, useful references, plain language news, and helpful links to other sites related to this initiative.

www.plainlanguage.gov officially launches on March 31, 2004, sponsored by the Federal Web Content Management Working Group (of the Interagency Committee on Government Information). The goal of the Web Content Management Working Group is to make U.S. Government websites the most citizen-focused and visitor-friendly in the world. They help the committee meet its ultimate goal -- making it easier for all Americans to find and use the Government information and services they need.

Next Steps

All websites provide an opportunity for continuous improvement. For the next phase in development, content volunteers plan to revisit the text in the site and – following the GECKO framework once more – make shifts in tone and structure to better serve the site's community of users. A team of editorial specialists will be participating in this next round of work.

For More Information

For additional information on the project, the process, or strategies for structuring products with the user in mind -- contact Thom Haller, Principal, Info.Design, Inc. (thom@thomhaller.com). Learn more about Thom at www.thomhaller.com and about the work of Info.Design, Inc. at www.infodn.com