Summary of Web Research Findings

Elevating the Digital Experience at Northern Arizona University

January 2011
Introduction/Overview

Research Objectives and Activities

The influence of web-based content (i.e. text, images, photos, etc.) is now vastly important to the way that an organization is perceived. A website is often the first impression a visitor has of an organization, and our university is no different. Our ability to elevate the visibility of academic programs, articulate institutional strengths like diversity and sustainability, or convey a sense of “fit” to prospective students and faculty depends to a large degree on our ability to create and maintain web content that is useful, relevant, accurate, and timely. Additionally, the presence of high-quality content on university websites has been demonstrated to be critical for success in several strategic areas, including student recruitment, student retention, increased operational efficiencies, and ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities.

In this context, the university wanted to understand how its website shaped perceptions among key audiences, including prospective students, parents, alumni, current students, faculty, staff, employers, and other influencers. So the university commissioned a number of research projects designed to assess the quality and consistency of its digital content for key audiences.

In late 2009, an extensive web research study was conducted to determine how effective our website is in accurately portraying the university’s brand, and, therefore, in shaping visitors’ perceptions of the university. Additional research related to best practices, including a review of peer institutions’ sites, was gathered on a number of relevant topics. This research examined the relative importance of web content quality to strategic university drivers; other research projects included an extensive analysis of the Undergraduate Admissions site, an inventory of the university’s website and personnel resources used to support it, and research related to the scope and quality of the university’s social media activity.

Overall Findings

The research pointed to two important findings. One is that web content quality and user experience have a powerful impact on visitors’ perceptions of universities. The second is that the content quality and user experience currently offered by the university’s website do not adequately meet our visitors’ needs, and that this negatively affects their perceptions of Northern Arizona University.

Response

Following the completion of the majority of research projects, the EDEN (Elevating the Digital Experience at NAU) Initiative was launched to fundamentally transform the way we communicate with prospective students and existing members of the university community through our website. This transformative process will occur through a long-term, multiple-project initiative designed to address all relevant aspects of web presence management, including content strategy and maintenance, design, web content management technology, measurement, accessibility, social media, mobile access, and more. For more information, please visit nau.edu/eden.
Web Research Key Findings

Importance of Web Presence to Perception of a University

A university’s web presence strongly influences its perception among prospective students, and the content on our current website does a suboptimal job of representing Northern Arizona University.

- According to research conducted in 2009, “students at the primary and secondary phases of the college search rely heavily on an institution’s Web site, which is also rated as the second-most-trusted source for all prospective students, behind a campus visit.”
- The same report concluded that, “given the time prospective students spend researching colleges via the Web, it is fair to assume that many of the early institutional identity and brand impressions they develop during the college search stem directly from the content, feel, and architecture of admissions Web sites.”
- A 2010 Web Research Study found that the vast majority of key stakeholders perceive a university’s brand through its website. After having invested significantly in building the brand during the past seven years, the consistently subpar web content levels that currently exist could undermine that investment.
- Research of college-bound high school students has indicated that the university’s current site content is neither compelling nor engaging, and that the existing website makes the university look like a “second-tier institution.”
- According to a 2010 study, 63 percent of prospective students agreed with this statement: “My impression of what NAU offers is better than my impression of the NAU website.” The same study found respondents rated the university’s site highest in the “average and ordinary” and “dull and sleepy” categories in a comparison to peer institutions.

Importance of a User-Focused Web Presence

Content is one component in the web presence discussion. Usability is another. A website that is difficult to use loses credibility and negatively influences visitors’ attitudes.

- A 2010 study of the university’s website revealed that “issues with site navigation were mentioned by focus group participants throughout the site… In addition, the lack of consistent page headers on interior pages and a standard URL structure made it even more difficult for a user to know where they were on the site, and wasn’t helpful in providing a clear path for them to get where they wanted to go. The lack of clear navigation also makes it hard to tell where other critical pieces of information might or might not be found.”
- In a 2008 Northern Arizona University website usability study, 71 percent of the respondents reported “consistency of navigation” would be a “very useful” feature on the site.
- A 2007 usability study on the university’s site painted a bleak picture of user frustration: “A common thread in exit questionnaire responses was the inconsistency in navigation and site structure among various departments. Participants indicated that it was inconvenient to have to reorient themselves within the different site structures.”

6 Northern Arizona University Graduate College Web Site Usability Study. Conducted by University Marketing, 2008.
7 Northern Arizona University College of Engineering and Natural Sciences Web Site Usability Study. Conducted by University Marketing, 2007.
Importance of Consistency

Consistency impacts both brand perception and user experience on a site. Overall, the university offers an inconsistent user experience in terms of content quality, ease of navigation, and brand identity.

- A 2009 review of peer institution sites found that “few institutions are adept at differentiating themselves online through content, style, or photography. And when they do, that brand can fall apart when visitors navigate to internal pages that are entirely different.”

- A 2010 analysis of the university’s site found its consistency was unacceptable: “Clear, consistent navigation and way-finding content ensure users know where they are, where to click next, and how to get back to other relevant content. The NAU site lacks this clarity, allowing users to get lost and confused.”

- Across more than 300 distinct web properties, a 2010 site inventory found only 52 percent of university sites properly use the global navigation scheme, while 69 percent of all sites rate “average” or “poor” in terms of branding consistency.

- The same inventory revealed 62 percent of the properties surveyed rated “average” or “poor” on page layout consistency, and 47 percent received the same ratings for department-level navigation consistency.

Strategic Value of Quality Web Content

Quality web content can help support strategic university initiatives like student recruitment and student retention.

- According to a 2010 survey of more than 1,000 college-bound high school students, 92 percent of respondents said they would be disappointed with a college or remove it entirely from their consideration if they didn’t find the information they needed on its website.

- In a 2006 study of 129 U.S. university websites, a strong correlation was found between higher average freshman retention rates and highly usable content, which includes minimal use of jargon, simplified menus, and consistent use of language.

- Universities are increasingly being scrutinized for lack of compliance with web accessibility regulations: Penn State University was cited with a formal Federal complaint because of allegedly high levels of inaccessibility on PSU web properties.

- A 2010 review of 183 higher education websites measured the accessibility of the sites for blind visitors. In the review, Northern Arizona University ranked 67th. Zero percent of the university web pages reviewed had elements like “password boxes, radio buttons, file buttons, check boxes, ‘select’ buttons…” properly labeled so text readers could pick up and convert the content.

- In a 2009 study, college-bound students rated “Programs Offered” as the most important factor in selecting a college; however, in a 2010 audit of the university’s web presence, 49 percent of all academic program sites rated “average” or “poor” in terms of the level of user experience offered. Similarly, a majority of participants in 2010 usability testing sessions expressed discontent with the breadth of information and the quality of content on degree program pages.

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10 Northern Arizona University Website Inventory. Conducted by University Marketing, 2010.
16 Northern Arizona University Website Inventory. Conducted by University Marketing, 2010.
Relative Levels of University Web Resources

In 2010, department chairs and directors across the university were surveyed about the resources they had for maintaining their websites. The survey found web resources do exist across campus, but are generally an additional duty performed by personnel who are not specifically trained or focused on web content creation.

- Eighty-one percent of respondents in this survey listed a lack of resource in terms of time or qualified personnel as the major barrier preventing them from maintaining their web presence at an acceptable level.
- The same survey revealed that a variety of processes exist for managing web content, from single person efforts to large, multi-step, multi-person workflows.

Scope and Quality of Social Media Use at the University

Members of the university community are actively engaged in using social media outposts, to varying degrees of quality and consistency.

- In a 2009 survey of more than 200 social media leaders—bloggers, entrepreneurs, etc.—keeping up with social media was key: “When asked what social networking feature was the most critical to users for everyday use, more people chose the status update over any other option.”
- According to a recent audit of the university’s social media activity, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter have the most robust presence, though most accounts are not official university ones. The survey also found that the university’s representation on Youtube, Wordpress/Blogger, and MySpace was minimal, with few accounts and sporadic updates.
- There are between 30 and 40 Facebook pages directly affiliated with the university and linked to and from the university website; most were created by students and alumni. Only 40 percent of the current pages are updated on a regular basis.
- There were 25 Twitter accounts affiliated with the university (including student clubs) and eight accounts created by faculty and staff who referenced the university in some way. Just over 50 percent are updated on a regular basis.
- An audit of the university’s social media presence found that “within social media channels, NAU’s presence has been deteriorating…. In regards to NAU’s own social outposts, inactivity and lack of responsiveness has resulted in many missed opportunities. This includes potential students asking for more information or expressing interest in attending, as well as alumni attempting to stay connected with the school and community.”

19 Northern Arizona University Social Media Audit. Conducted by University Marketing, 2010.