

Memo

To: Dànielle Nicole DeVoss
From: Tyler Smeltekop
Date: 3/3/08
Re: Design considerations into revision of PW Program Site

Preliminary Design Processes

In undertaking the redesign of the Professional Writing website, several preliminary decisions had to occur before ever beginning the mockup phase.

- Who is the intended audience?
- What is ineffective about the current design and information architecture?
- What are the goals in redesigning the site?

In response to the previous issues, respectively:

- The main demographic are current PW students. While the site is to also serve as a recruitment tool to draw in current MSU students in other majors, and incoming freshmen, the current site lacked the draw for students who are already in Professional Writing. In addition, the PW faculty should also find the new site to be helpful in advising their students. Lastly, there is a need for the redesigned site to allow community and industry figures to tap into the talent that exists in the PW community.
- The current site suffered from some major issues.
 - Blue color scheme ineffectively branded the MSU identity with the PW Program.
 - Lacked personality: absence of images (particularly ones featuring PW students and their work), un-engaging design.
 - Site structure was effective; however, content needed better organization.
- The main goal was to create a site that reflected the vibrance and identity of the program, which lies in the ability and community of its students.

Research

In order to get a better understanding of the type of website I was to redesign, I looked into other universities' Professional or Technical Writing program sites. I researched how MSU college and program websites handled design and navigation. I made one rather blunt conclusion: most of the MSU program sites as well as Writing sites at other universities suck.

What I discovered was that there was only one site that positively inspired my design choices, this being the MSU College of Human Medicine's site. This site used a dynamic color scheme, as well as some very interesting information architecture and layout in order to provide information to all demographics.

Considering how many different groups the Human Medicine College must reach, I was impressed with the site. From the others, I more or less made note of what they did that didn't work, and tried to avoid them during the creation of my mockups. These mishaps usually fell into the category of unjustified design elements and unsuitable navigation.

Mockups

My approach in drafting mockups was to create a different feel for each of the three. I wanted to do a straightforward, typical design similar to many academic program sites; a site that showcased interesting and eye-catching design elements; and finally, a middle ground between both, something that was organized, clean, professional, but engaging and interesting.

I have discussed the pros and cons of each of my mockups in my presentation given during class. However, I will comment in general on each here.

The first mockup was not intended to be employed. Rather, I wanted to demonstrate the style of an academic site and use elements that might be carried forward into the final mockup. As it would happen, almost none of the elements were kept.

The second mockup kept the same logo design and similar banner effect for one reason: it was effective to a point, and allowed me to focus more on the body and navigation of the site. Granted, I wasn't enthusiastic about the text treatment, but it was a step in some kind of direction. In the end, the mockup will remain in my files, as I am particularly happy with how that checkered background turned out.

The third mockup was made after a short break from this project. I felt that I was getting a bit locked into boxes. I decided, upon returning to the project, that I wasn't approaching the design in the best way. I wanted the banner to convey motion and high dynamics and style. However, I also wanted it to exude professionalism. The stylized "PW" text treatment, coupled with the Arial subheading text and "MSU" in the official MSU typeface, made for a simple and elegant banner. I'm very pleased with the way it epitomizes the feel of our program.

The final mockup was based on the third design, with some refinements made. The majority of changes were tweaks involving extraneous and unjustified design elements. The navigation was streamlined into a simple text-and-solid-background horizontal bar. I felt that the glossy Mac-esque aqua buttons detracted from the banner and the content, and didn't really fit the theme of the design. The other major change was to remove the purely aesthetic graphics bar between the nav and content area. I couldn't think of a reason to keep it, so it was cut.

Decisions on the Final Redesign

COLOR

The final color scheme has moved away from the palette that was discussed initially. Blue, orange, and Spartan green have become Spartan green, lime green, and tan. While the first palette is dynamic and eye-catching, in my attempts to work with it, I couldn't make them mesh well. One color would be come a primary color (usually the Spartan green), and the employment of the remaining two would appear to be afterthoughts. By going with a more single color-centric palette, I found that I could still convey the energy through shape and text treatment rather than a greater emphasis on bright colors.

LAYOUT

The College of Human Medicine website employed boxes of content on their homepage, and resulted in a very slick, professional look that was at the same time, highly usable. The same idea was carried into my redesign, as I wanted to take advantage of the users' tendency to find containers. The banner is the consistent design element that brands the desired PW identity on each page, no matter what content appears on the page. By using the simple and clean boxes and columns, the layout is easy to navigate and is professional.

Closing Considerations

Due to the lack of MySQL and PHP support, plans for a blog will have to be shelved, but can still be implemented. I think there would be interest among the PW students in reading what our Director would have to say. The PW mailing list distributes tons of great information, but tends to feel a lot like junk mail. Furthermore, there's usually little to no personal touch. A blog (set up through another service, and linked to on the home page) might allow you to discuss things that all PW students should know about.

I am very happy with the way the site looks and navigates. From the feedback I've received from other PW students, my sentiments are echoed. I hope that you too will enjoy maintaining the site and keeping the content fresh and new.