



# Sign 'Em Up

*The registration website is often a visitor's first impression and main source of info for your next big event. By designing it with the user's goals and needs in mind, you can eliminate headaches for both the user and your staff—and see increased attendance.*

**By Randy Carey**

The success of any event is strongly tied to the website that supports it. A registration site must do more than just enable prospective attendees to register for an event. It should guide visitors in their decision to attend and prepare them for a rewarding experience. Investing thought and effort into improving this web experience will pay off through increased registrations and more engaged attendees.

At the Women's Foodservice Forum (WFF), we recently overhauled the registration site for our annual conference. By applying proven principles and practices from the discipline of application development, we tackled the challenges listed above, added value with new features, and shifted to a more user-

whether they are inconveniencing the user or the registrar.

Typically, the problems most worth fixing are those that confuse or frustrate the user and those that tie up registration-desk resources. Some improvements can be made without a major overhaul, so pay attention to the calls reaching the registration center to identify user confusion. Because web pages can be updated easily, many issues can be mitigated quickly by updating the site with corrections and clarifications or by elevating the prominence of key information.

Two years ago, our greatest pains came from login problems and from paper registrations, which comprised more than 50 percent of our total

### Think Like Your Users

WFF chose to add several features for our users in 2007, including online tools for planning workshops, registration for multiple people within one shopping cart, hotel-room reservations, and viewing and changing workshop selections online well after one has registered.

To enhance your registration site, you must gain an understanding of the motivation and perspective of your target registrant, even if it requires the focus to shift attention away from the host company.

Mark LeBlanc, president of the National Speakers Association, often tells his audiences how his stalled business took off once he changed his elevator speech. When he described himself



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centered experience. During the first two months registrations were up, the issues that previously plagued the registration desk were down, and the site received plenty of kudos. Because registration sites are now so ubiquitous and share so much in common, the practices we followed and the lessons we learned are worth sharing.

### Identify Areas for Improvement

The first step toward upgrading your registration site is to refer to previous experiences to identify and address known issues and points of pain,

registrations and heavily consumed resources. We reworked our login system, improved the online registration process, and applied a surcharge on paper applications. As a result, we reduced the amount of mailed-in forms to nearly one percent.

Given the nature of people, complaints will never be eradicated. But by identifying the pain points, improvements can be found that ease the burden for users willing to help themselves. Then you can invest time to identify new features that add value to the user and the company and to find an effective way to deliver them.

by reciting his titles or product offerings, no one responded with business inquiries. But once he phrased his line in terms of how he helped clients—"I help small business grow and people to start small businesses"—a third of his hearers actively sought his services. Any website design would benefit from the lesson of effective elevator speeches.

A registration site that defines its event in terms of the importance of the host company or as a list of products will register only those who have already decided to attend. But a site that defines the event in terms of how

it will help attendees advance in their careers or personal lives will be effective in persuading casual visitors to seek the funding and time to attend.

Similarly, you should reassess your site's navigation from the user perspective. Can the options and the phrasing of the options be reworked to reflect the motivations of the visitor? Reread the content. Are the speakers and functions described merely as "products"? Can they be reworded to express their value to attendees? The effectiveness of a site is completely centered around the user, why she is there, and what she wants to accomplish on the site.

A shift to a truly usercentric approach requires a commitment that may seem daring. It requires rethinking everything about the traditional site and the courage to rework navigation, wording, and presentation of information.

### Know Your Goals

Before the website can be built, it needs to be structured so that it will effectively advance the project's goals.

"Use cases" are a proven technique that has guided software-application development for nearly two decades. A use case states a task that a user wants to perform while using the application (in this case a website). The design and implementation of a website can be evaluated by how easy it is for a user to find the starting point of these tasks and how easy each is to complete. A design that is held accountable to use cases contributes toward a usercentric registration site.

The challenge to high-level web design is to give adequate attention to as many use cases as possible but not so many that the clutter of options diminishes the prominence of the most important pieces. Louis Rosenfeld, who literally wrote the book on information architecture (see *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, third edition), states that a web design should identify and address the top 80 percent of tasks that users will expect from the site.

In the WFF project, I documented the most important and most frequent needs of a visitor to our registration site:

- Evaluate the conference and decide whether to attend.
- Recall high-level details such as date, place, cost, and deadlines.
- Review this year's optional functions and workshops.
- Plan an agenda and workshop selection.
- Register (self or other coworkers).
- Evaluate hotel options.
- Reserve hotel.
- Prepare for the event:
  - Know what to bring and what to expect.
  - Obtain a roster in advance.
  - Recall and print the agenda.
  - Contact someone at WFF.
  - Take the WFF Leadership Competency Assessment (which WFF encourages).

Every one of these tasks needed to be easy for the user to find and complete in the final site design.

### Structure the Site Accordingly

Information architecture (IA) is the other side of the use-case coin. It is the orchestration of all website elements (graphics, wireframes, behavior, navigation, page sequencing, and so forth) to ensure that the user can accomplish her tasks.

While the menu structure is one of the most important aspects of web design and rightfully deserves much attention, addressing only navigation falls short. The user's experience is affected by the number and prominence of web page elements, competing graphical components, clarity of verbiage, consistency of look and behavior across pages, and the sequence of pages to accomplish a task. Everything that affects the user's experience should be considered.

In the WFF project, we surmised the IA objectives before launching into design. For instance, we would use a stationary column on the left that would always display the critical infor-

mation and reflect the event's branding. The scrollable region would always be topped with the same menu, allowing the user to start any task from any page.

By documenting them up front, the use cases and information architecture went on to drive design through tough trade-off decisions. In any site-planning process, without a disciplined respect for these documents, later decisions are bound to compromise the goals of the project and prominence of the use cases.

For instance, I was presented with a design proposal in which the landing page required the user to go through a sequence of information before reaching a page with the full menu. The list of use cases quickly revealed that such a design hampered a returning user with focused objectives such as recalling key information, registering for the event, or obtaining an updated copy of the attendee roster. Documented use cases and IA help keep the design honoring the project's goals.

Sometimes the use cases and IA will lead to a new approach. In the WFF project, the most significant invention was the task-segmented menu, which allowed us to transition away from the traditional product-driven navigation to a task-driven one.

The advantages of the task-segmented menu are many. The starting points for most of the critical tasks can be found in the menu buttons, not buried somewhere beyond the buttons. Most registration sites list a dozen or more menu options, but the segmented menu visually organizes these into three logical groups, making navigation more intuitive. Typically a user is interested in only one segment at any one time. Each segment is worded in terms of what the user wants to accomplish, making the menu very usercentric.

### The Final Product

The information and registration pages for the more prominent events are built as a microsite. While the look and feel of a microsite is often identifiable with the organization's main website, it is

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independent of the parent site and has its own identity and navigation.

In the case of a registration site, the microsite plays an important IA role: The details and navigation of the organization's general site do not clutter the microsite's design, giving more prominence to the use cases identified for this project. A second benefit is that a microsite does not force an event's graphics and branding to compete with the graphics and branding of the organization's general site.

A good content management system (CMS) is important for any significant web project. However, these tools vary in complexity and how they build web pages, so tool selection is important.

We realized early on that our general site's CMS was too heavyweight for the agile development of a microsite. Experience warned that this project would see many change requests. To avoid the delay and cost of custom-programmed templates, I chose a lightweight and inexpensive CMS, CityDesk, that allowed me to update and customize the page designs independently and quickly in simple HTML and CSS. Staff were able to update speaker content, registration and hotel status, and any other announcements within minutes.

At the same time, don't settle for out-of-the-box functionality. Customize or build extended functionality when needed improvements or added value

demands it.

WFF uses the new suite of iMIS 15 web products. The registration module works well for simple events, but for our annual conference we wanted more than what it delivers out of the box. Some features that added a lot of value, such as paying dues during registration or allowing registrants to change workshops online, required custom coding. I almost always invest the extra money and time to develop customization that is reusable.

We gained control and agility in customization by having our iMIS provider insert "hooks" into the generated HTML code. Each registration page is built at runtime with user information expressed as JavaScript variables and with calls to CSS and JS files. These hooks allowed me to employ and inject many add-on features such as centralized billing, custom formatting of the workshop listings, limits on who could register for certain workshops, and different info displays based upon the user's member status.

Many registration sites will benefit from segmenting overview content based upon first-timers versus returning attendees, another usercentric feature. Identify the questions a first-timer will have and provide an appropriate orientation to the event. Likewise, build upon the perspective of the returning attendee and explain what's new and

improved. But be forewarned—differentiated content can be the most challenging content to write and get right.

Additionally, design the web version as a sibling to the print version, not as a mirror of print. Web pages vary significantly from print, so what works graphically and functionally in one often fails in the other. For example, linking, scrolling, and JavaScript allow web solutions to exceed the limitations of print. Determine up front the event's branding, graphics, and themes, and then design the web and print as siblings.

The extra effort adds value and usability to the user's experience during registration. And that is what registration improvements are about: addressing known issues, adding functionality, and focusing on the user. ■

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