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A NEW METHOD FOR WEBSITE ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS: A MANIFESTO OF OPTIMIZATION

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Those who succeed are not the ones attempting to recreate what has already been accomplished, but those who find the best connections between seemingly disparate pieces—causing them to work in unity toward a larger goal. It is no longer enough to create a website and hope that something happens with it. That was the approach in the 1990s. Many people and institutions are still operating according to that mindset. This is no longer an adequate method for website engagement. It is boring and will not give anyone a good reason to reach your desired goal. But then again, the goal itself might be the real issue. What is the goal that you are trying to achieve with your website? Can you concisely state what your goal is? If you do not know what the goal of your website is, then you must confront and tackle what is arguably your most difficult task: defining your goal.

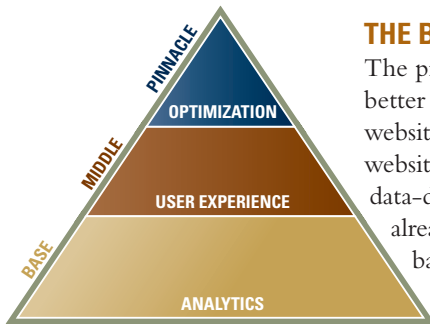
Today's successful websites have a goal toward which they are working. Most higher education websites have at least two website goals: to increase qualified student applications and to increase alumni giving. This is, perhaps, a simplified version of your own institution's website goals, but many can be boiled down to these two primary goals. Once you have defined your goal, then you already know what you are looking to accomplish. Perhaps you will find secondary insights as you pursue your goal, but they are not the primary insights. Every element of the site focuses on the larger purpose of the website. The website can work together with other marketing campaigns because the website is treated as the hub of all marketing activity. This is the proper treatment

of the website because all elements can be tracked, tested, and improved. You can make changes that affect the overall goal success because you know with certainty that those changes will assist in the attainment of the larger purpose of the website.

It is not enough to be merely goal-based; you must also be data-driven with your website. Focus your efforts on the goals through data-driven decisions. For example, take the aforementioned goal to increase qualified student applications. You can choose to add certain fields to your information request form to ensure that the individual completing the form is not just considering, but is also qualified to attend your institution.

Success requires a goal-based, data-driven approach to achieve website user engagement and conversion through incremental change. The method is simple: start with the information at hand, add accepted standards, test, and optimize your website. Put another way: you simply need to **measure, test, optimize, and repeat.**

This approach is simple when taken in steps. As the saying goes, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." We have broken this method down into three distinct levels—a hierarchy of website success, if you will. The hierarchy includes analytics, user experience, and ultimately, optimization.



THE BASE: ANALYTICS

The primary focus of website analytics is to better understand what is happening on your website and to reduce uncertainty in future website choices. This is the data part of the data-driven decision making that we have already mentioned. This should be the basic foundation from which all website decisions are made.

Web analytics typically involves measuring a user's clickstream with tools such as Google Analytics. These tools are immensely helpful and, alone, can provide insight into your website activity. However, your analysis should not stop with a clickstream tool. If you incorporate competitive intelligence analysis and benchmarking services, then you will better understand how you stand against your competition. There are many inexpensive or free tools available for analyzing your own website as well as the sites of your competitors. Some of the better tools that we have encountered include Google Insights for Search, Google Trends, and Alexa. What you will find is that there is already a lot of data about your website available. When you assess your goals and look toward finding answers to your goal-based questions, then you can cull the irrelevant information and focus on the valuable pieces.

Consider the following example of using analytics to achieve your goals: You have discovered through Google Trends that there is a pocket of interest in Reston, Virginia, for a Master of Education degree. Since Reston is already on your radar for its high-income population and because your institution has a Master of Education degree, it makes sense to look a little deeper at your clickstream analytics to find how interested the residents of Reston are in your website. If you create an advanced segment that shows the traffic that your website receives from Reston, Virginia, as compared to the rest of your website, then you can look over the past year to see the rise or fall of interest by month for those residents. If you have goals set up in your clickstream tool, as well as a relative goal value, then you can further look at the individual page dollar value for your Reston visitors and better

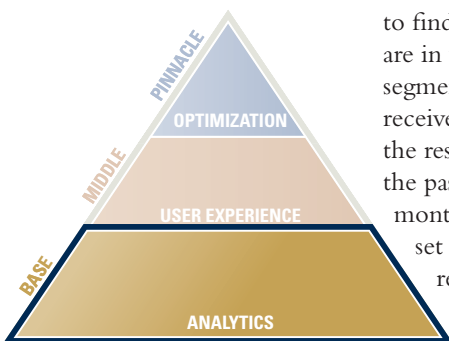
determine which pages are specifically causing them to convert (applying to your Master of Education program).

Note that this disparate information can be connected in a relatively easy fashion to understand the processes and behaviors of a desirable segment of the population. At this point, you will be able to know if the advertising efforts that you have put forth in Reston are working or if they are a waste of resources. By utilizing campaign tracking, you can further understand which specific campaigns are converting visitors in Reston and which are not. Then, you will be in a position to reallocate resources to the campaigns that work from the campaigns that do not work. Now, you are on the track to the ultimate goal: optimization.

Perhaps, you have a target demographic that you have been driving all efforts toward converting, but another demographic has increased interest. How would you know that unless you were measuring the efficacy of your efforts and comparing the results to other results? You can begin to understand your true demographics in a better way instead of focusing on a set of people that have very little interest in what you have to offer. This refinement of focus is relatively easy to achieve when you are consistently looking at the right data.

When you look at your clickstream data, ask yourself the following questions: Who visits my website? Where are they coming from? What are they looking for? Are they finding what they are looking for? Are they completing my goal? If so, what steps are they taking? If not, where are they dropping out of the funnel? What is different about the visitors that convert and the visitors that do not convert?

If your ultimate goal is to get a potential student to apply, then the completion of an application is defined as a macro-conversion. However, do not neglect the importance of micro-conversions. The smaller steps that they take (requesting an information pack or signing up for a campus visit) are equally important. The micro-conversions provide additional insight into the macro-conversions. Segment out the website visitors



SEO CHECKLIST

The following checklist is a good starting point for search engine optimization. Advanced techniques will incorporate other elements, but all SEO should at (least start) here.

- Descriptive Title tags
- Use the following format: "Page Title | University Name"
- For example, "Biology - Undergraduate Admissions | College University"
- Use concise meta descriptions
- Heading of page in H1 tags
- Appropriate use of H2, H3, and sometimes H4 tags
- Bold and italicized text as appropriate through the use of Strong and Em tags
- Alt text for all images
- Descriptive anchor text for all internal navigation
- Use of XML Sitemap and/or RSS feed
- Use of robots.txt file
- Properly formatted and descriptive URLs such as the following:
- <http://blog.stamats.com/index.php/2010/12/22/how-to-increase-enrollment-through-your-website-part-one/>
- Appropriate use of copy
- Content is king

who requested an information pack and also applied to the school. Then, segment out the website visitors who requested an information pack but did not apply to the school. What are the differences in their behavior? How do their interests differ? Where are they coming from? Is there a specific page that visitors who apply visit compared to visitors who do not apply? How might you bring that page closer to the front of the website? Can you drive people to that specific page through a pay-per-click ad? What about incorporating that page into another page?

As you can quickly see, the realm of possibilities opens up when you begin to look into the actions and interests of your website users. The clickstream tools alongside of other pieces of data can reveal new areas of focus that are lucrative, but have never been considered before. Allow your creativity to work with you in the process as you gather and analyze data. Before you act too quickly, however, you will need to couple this information with web standards.

THE MIDDLE: USER EXPERIENCE

At the secondary level of the website success hierarchy is user experience. Simply stated, user experience takes into consideration how an individual visiting your site experiences it. It is critical to understand that while as an institution you may have several ideas you want to communicate with your target audience, they have come to your website on their own terms and with their own task in mind. Abandon the notion that individuals come to your site just to "browse around" and commit to the idea that they are there looking for something specific. The more quickly they can get what they need, the better experience they will have.

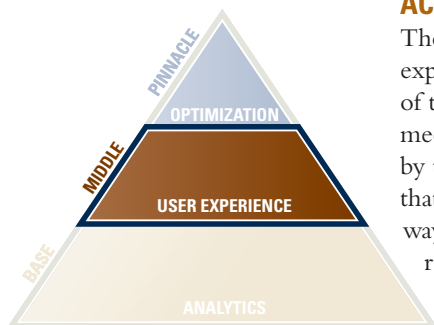
ACCESSIBILITY AND STANDARDS

The first step to achieving a successful user experience is to follow standards. Regardless of the industry, all websites should aim to meet W3C standards. These standards, created by the World Wide Web Consortium, ensure that all websites are accessible. The simplest way to know if you meet these standards is to run your website(s) through the W3C's free markup validation service and address any issues that may be noted. Beyond that,

the Americans with Disabilities Act requires all federal agency websites in the U.S. to meet Section 508 accessibility standards (many of which are derived from W3C). While the legality of Section 508 is more of a concern for public institutions, following these standards provides a better user experience. Moreover, several of the necessary requirements make your website more search-engine friendly as your site becomes easier for search engine spiders to "read."

Higher education as a whole also has a set of standards that have evolved over the last few decades. Before you make the case to do something different, make sure you have a good reason because users become accustomed to navigating various college and university websites in a somewhat consistent manner. The most common barrier to an effective user experience in higher education is a large, decentralized website that directs users in several directions without clearly funneling them through to the appropriate areas. While standards will continue to evolve, we have found that the most successful institutions have begun treating their main .edu site as a publicly facing website meant primarily to provide information for prospective students and their parents, potential donors, alumni, and community members. Additionally, the general navigation structure for all websites typically involves some sort of main navigation that is held constant throughout the site. Consistency is good. It helps users find their place in your site, and it makes your site easier to navigate.

So much emphasis in a "website redesign" typically revolves around the newly developed designs. While it is important to develop a certain look and feel for your users, understand that the content provided on your site is paramount. Content includes not just the copy, but also the images, graphics, and links contained on each and every page. For as much time as you spend determining colors, etc., spend twice as much identifying the essential tasks your users are expecting to complete and then create content that moves them toward what they need.



USEFUL RESOURCES

- W3C Markup Validation Service <http://validator.w3.org/>
- Google Analytics <http://www.google.com/analytics/>
- Google Website Optimizer <https://www.google.com/analytics/siteopt/splash>
- Google Trends <http://www.google.com/trends>
- Google Insights for Search <http://www.google.com/insights/search/>
- Alexa <http://www.alexa.com/>

GLOSSARY

Competitive Intelligence Analysis

Competitive intelligence analysis is a method for comparing the status of your website to that of competing institutions. This includes comparing over-time graphs of performance, visitor demographic information, and search engine ranking success among other factors.

Clickstream

Clickstream analytics makes use of server logs in trend analysis of data. Among other things, it records the number of visits and visitors to a website.

Conversion

In website analytics, a conversion is when a visitor to the website completes a desired task or goal. This could involve submitting an enrollment application, scheduling a visit, or requesting more information.

Goal Value

A goal value enables you to determine how well web pages and campaigns perform. It allows you to see a dollar value associated with specific web pages and campaigns. By using an algorithm, clickstream tools, such as Google Analytics, extend the dollar figure across pages that drive visitors to a conversion. This provides a basis for knowing which pages need to be optimized.

USABILITY TESTING

Commonly confused with focus groups, usability testing is comprised of a one-on-one testing environment where you try to recreate a real-life scenario. Whereas focus groups collect opinions and thoughts, usability testing zeros in on a user's actions, identifying how one might truly use your site. There is no better way to come to terms with how your audience really uses your site than by conducting usability testing.

It is essential to watch what users do, not just what they say. For example, during an on-campus focus group with parents of prospective students, nearly all replied "yes" when asked if they would use a "Parents" navigation button found on the home page of the University's website. Several months later, a different handful of parents of prospective students were asked to participate in a usability study for a prototype of the institution's website. A navigation button on this website was "Parents." The participants performed several different tasks and only once did one of the individuals click any type of audience-based navigation. The button they used? Future students.

We can surmise that until a parent's son or daughter commits to an institution, the parent tends to act vicariously as though he or she is the son or daughter using the website. The parent reviews the same information meant for potential students.

You can choose the level of complexity for a usability test. But, before conducting the actual testing, make sure that you perform the test in some way, shape, or form. Effective usability testing aims to reduce confusion or create efficiency, not identify every possible problem across a single site. Your testing method may involve something as simple as a testing instructor and an observer to jot notes. Or, you may opt to use more advanced software to record video of the sessions to share with various stakeholders later on (here at Stamats, we are fans of using Morae to record participants).

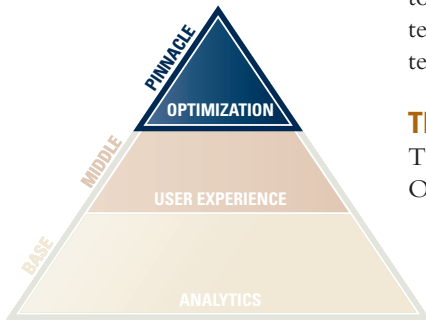
According to Dr. Jakob Nielsen, usability expert and co-founder of the Nielsen Norman Group, five participants can find up to 85 percent of

problems during a usability test. Using a total of 15 participants could find all of the issues. However, once you reach five, each session will be less and less informative. Therefore, Nielsen advocates running multiple tests, each with small groups of five participants. While the problems found during testing are as is, the route to correct these issues is somewhat subjective. Therefore, testing a second round enables you to determine if the problem was solved.

What should you test? Choose five to 10 tasks that your target audience wants to complete when visiting your site. The tasks should relate back to achieving your overarching project goals. Tasks can include attempting to find information, such as if an institution offers the user's desired major or tuition and costs. Tasks may also measure a user's ability to complete an action, such as signing up for a community, filling out a form to schedule a visit, or even completing the application.

While testing with your target audience is ideal, it is not absolutely necessary. Make it a point to find individuals who have little familiarity with your institution (or an inside perspective of higher education, for that matter). Depending on the tasks which you are asking them to complete, it can be as simple as finding a friend, spouse, or colleague to run through a quick test. We do tend to find that testing high school students who have started their college search process yields different results. Higher education includes a lot of jargon (yes, even the word "admissions" to some). Therefore, testing the site with individuals who don't use such jargon will give you the truest sense of whether or not your site is easy to use.

Make it your goal to modify based on your results so that users can complete these tasks more easily and efficiently. However, recognize that your solution to the problem may or may not move you toward your goal. For example, Amazon.com removed the related items that appeared at the shopping cart stage after testing because they found that these items distracted individuals from moving through the checkout process and completing transactions.



With all of this information, know that your website should never be considered “done.” Instead, websites should always be considered to be in perpetual beta, constantly in need of testing, and always eligible for improvement in terms of the user experience.

THE PINNACLE: OPTIMIZATION

There is always room for improvement.

Optimizing the process is of great importance when you are actively improving your website and pursuing your institutional goals. It is within the optimization process that a depth of understanding of resources and engagement becomes apparent. To fully optimize the website, you must look back at analytics and test the options where uncertainty lies. The optimization process is largely about progressive enhancements. The more you optimize your website, the more conversions you can receive.

Optimizing your website through the use of A/B and multivariate testing is an efficient way to test several different versions of your website to see which ones are better at driving conversions. A/B tests and multivariate tests each have their own strengths when trying to understand user interaction and engagement.

A/B testing enables you to examine several different and complete versions of a web page. This can mean that you are testing two entirely different designs or entirely different copy.

Multivariate tests are similar to A/B tests in that they are testing different page elements. However, it is solely the page elements and not the entire page that is being tested. For instance, you can test the effectiveness of different header images of heading text on a page while testing other variations in copy, navigation, or other pieces. Using a multivariate test, you will be able to section off various page elements to see how they work under different combinations. A specific instance of this may include a page with an image of a woman riding a bicycle and a header that states “Explore our campus.” Those two sections may be tested by using another image of a man climbing a rock wall and another optional heading that states “Enjoy

your time while in school.” By matching every possible combination of these two images and two headings, you have the option of testing four different versions of the page to see which one accomplishes your goal in the best way. Note that multivariate tests typically require a higher amount of traffic to ensure that you have a statistically relevant sample size.

It is best to test toward a specific purpose, but sometimes seemingly arbitrary combinations do have an unexpected effect. While you may consider that a specific student-athlete will generate more interest than another student in a biology class, you may be surprised when you find that the opposite can be true. By running A/B and multivariate tests on at least part of your website traffic, you are able to ascertain with certainty that the probability of a specific outcome will increase with certain versions.

One additional benefit of A/B and multivariate testing is that there are free or inexpensive tools such as Google Website Optimizer that allow you to quickly set up tests. Because these tools are so easy to use and access, there is no reason not to engage in site testing.

It should also be noted that data-driven websites are often forced to eradicate sentimental or pet page elements in favor of page elements that are better at converting. While a professor may want to use the university home page to advertise his research, the data may reveal that it hurts website conversions (enrollment applications, etc.) more than it helps. On the other hand, you may find that it drives more applicants than you previously thought. You cannot know until you test. Optimize accordingly and you will find that you have created a powerful website that produces conversions.

Optimization does not stop with A/B and multivariate testing. Search engine optimization (SEO) is an important consideration when optimizing a website. You should not only consider tweaking your website to convert visitors, but you should also tweak to be found. SEO standards are largely easy to follow and implement. A few simple modifications

Campaign Tracking

By adding parameters to the end of a website address (URL), it is possible to track the effectiveness of different campaigns. The addition of the URL parameters to reflect the campaign is referred to as campaign tracking. An example of this might look like the following URL: http://www.college.edu?utm_campaign=athleticcampaign1&utm_source=adnetwork1&utm_medium=cpc

A/B Test

An A/B or A/B/n test measures two or more page designs or content versions to determine which version produces the best conversion rate.

Multivariate Test

A multivariate test allows you to test different versions of different sections of a web page. This allows you to maintain the same layout, but provide different versions of copy, headings, images, or other page elements. The various combinations of elements provide many different versions of the page. You are then able to determine which combination of elements produces the best conversion rate.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO is the technique of writing copy and HTML so that search engines can properly index the web page in an effort to increase website traffic.

Example Scenario

College University has set up a multichannel campaign to increase the number of inquiries they receive. They have a billboard, a mailing, and an e-mail campaign. Each directs the potential student to the same web page; however, the University uses campaign tracking to identify which advertisement or mailing sent the user to the web page. Since they have a goal value in place for this campaign they are able to determine which channel is producing more inquiries. Tracking also allows them to see additional pages the users viewed while on the website. By looking at the high-value pages—those that produce more conversions—they identify which page layouts and calls-to-action are effective. By looking at low-value pages, they can easily determine which pages need to be optimized for a better user experience and improve calls-to-action. If College University acts on the data by optimizing pages, they have a much higher chance of reaching their inquiry goal. The institution also will have a clearer sense of how many website conversions are required in order to achieve a certain level of enrollment.

of your website can go a long way. Basic considerations such as concise, descriptive copy that appropriately uses headings as well as bold and italicized text can go a long way. Also, ensure that you have descriptive meta titles and descriptions. Review the SEO checklist with a web developer to ensure that you are accomplishing the necessary steps to be found in search engines.

CONCLUSION

Real optimization occurs when all of the steps described herein work together to accomplish your institution's website goals. Analytics provide a reduction of uncertainty and a comprehensive understanding of who, what, when, and where. That, coupled with logic and intuition, allows you to formulate the why. Analytics must serve as the foundation so that all of your decisions can be based on data that drives appropriate conclusions. When you have the data and can begin to see the trends, then it is time to re-evaluate the user experience. How well are you complying with web standards? How easy is it for people to navigate your website? Once you have re-evaluated your website's use of web standards and user experience models, it is time to optimize your on-page elements. Incorporate the standards of search engine optimization and test everything through the use of A/B and multivariate tests.

Test, evaluate, and test again. The methods and processes of optimization never stop. We live in a time of perpetual beta testing. Users have come to expect as much. They expect the basic elements, such as navigation, etc., to be standard and unchanging. But, the finer aspects, such as images, copy, and other on-page elements, are up for modification. Test so that you can determine that your goals are being accomplished efficiently and effectively. Test so that you can know what channels are working for you and what channels are causing you to lose money. Re-allocate, re-evaluate, and re-test. There is plenty of data to be had that will guide the process.

If you do not analyze, incorporate tested standards, test your own site, and optimize, then you are falling behind. The resources are available and ready to be used. Optimization is an investment in your institution, not an expenditure. It is the new method. To ignore it will not make it go away.

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Joshua Dodson

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Role: Joshua promotes and demonstrates innovative ways to utilize analytics and other web strategies for Stamats' higher education clients.

In addition to publishing and presenting extensively on using and adapting WordPress and open source software, Joshua has developed methods for engaging students through the use of library subject guides and open source software at academic libraries. For nearly 10 years he has been a web designer and developer. Joshua is a Google Analytics Certified Professional. He is proficient in (X)HTML, CSS, jQuery, PHP, and Google's web tools.

Joshua received his Bachelor of Arts in philosophy and religion from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. Recently, Joshua has put his SEO and analytics expertise to use for Harvard University's Search Engine Optimization campaign, Widener University, Marywood University, and the University of Michigan. He has developed custom analytics reports, segments, and projections for multiple clients.



Kati Davis

Digital Marketing Strategist

Role: Kati has provided strategic planning and direction to institutional web projects. Her tactical knowledge in website development, usability testing, site architecture, and wireframes has resulted in a strong online presence for her higher education clients. As a Google Adwords Certified Professional, Kati has managed online advertising campaigns that optimize a website's rankings naturally through search engine optimization.

Kati is a graduate of Drake University and holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communication with minors in business and history. As a digital marketing strategist Kati has worked with clients such as Savannah College of Art and Design, Harvard Division of Continuing Education, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, Mount Royal University, UNC-Chapel Hill, University of South Carolina, and several more.



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