

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The government site www.plainlanguage.gov espouses the use of clear and understandable writing in documents developed for citizens. Since its inception and careful information architectural crafting in 2006, it has gone through changes, including a change in responsibility for site maintenance. Recently, a legislative mandate has created unexpected new requirements for the site that the present implementation does not meet, resulting in criticism from frustrated users. With a different purpose and audience for the site, the original information architecture – no longer effective – will be revamped to meet changing needs.

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The Ouch Factor: What Happens When User Needs Change

by Thom Haller

I recently spent the morning watching a cursor move across a wall-sized screen. I listened to disembodied voices, broadcast from an adjoining room, describe their challenges with a website. The voices harbored dissatisfaction with the navigation. “I’m not sure how deep I am in this site,” one cried. “I have an action focus, I just want to do stuff,” wailed another. A third voice sighed, “I’m losing trust in your site.”

OUCH. That one hurt. I feel like he’s losing trust in MY site.

It’s not my site, really, but I feel a sense of ownership because the site and I share a past. Like many people associated with site development – especially folks involved in site architecture – we work to build a foundation that supports users; then, at some point, we pass the communication product on to clients. Before it launched, I helped out with the site I’m now viewing on the wall – plainlanguage.gov.

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I shouldn’t feel any “ouch” in this. It wasn’t actually my architecture. I facilitate architectures (or so I’d like to believe). And as a teacher, I direct students. The students actually delve into user research and develop usable site structures.

Besides, (harrumph), it hasn’t been *my* architecture since 2006 when the site was handed off to the client. But I’ve been nearby. And at the moment, while I’m participating in this site review, the client is sitting right next to me – valiantly taking notes, quickly identifying how she should move forward. As a volunteer.

Like many of us in the room, she volunteers time because we’re passionate about clear government communication. We’ve come together today to listen to users respond to specific task scenarios, such as finding advice on avoiding technical jargon in government writing.

We’re taking notes, watching a cursor and listening to voices move through www.plainlanguage.gov. We are guests of the General Services Administration, the government agency working to create good customer service in government. Officially, we are participants in the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), the interagency working group responsible for developing guidance on clear writing in government.

New guidance brings us together. It also creates an

exigency – an event or situation that requires a rhetorical response. In our situation, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is saying to federal writers, “Go to plainlanguage.gov to learn strategies for drafting documents for citizens.”

Unfortunately, the site no longer works.

I think about my history with the site. In 2006, my information architecture students encountered an early website that had been developed with little thought to architecture. My class explored its challenges. To envision a new structure, they asked focusing questions: “Who are the audiences of the site?” “What is the context that brings these people here?” “What is our context for developing the site?” “What is the purpose for users?” “What do they want to accomplish?”

The resulting website was built around the need for understanding. Its category labels highlight this need: “What is plain language?” “Why plain language?” The site was used as a framework for an argument – “clear writing in government matters.” It supported people who wanted to make that argument – typically, people who shared our passion for clear communication.

It’s now five years later, and the site must support new legislation designed to improve federal agencies’ effectiveness and their accountability to the public. OMB

identified the site as the “go-to location” for federal guidance on writing to support citizens.

With the arrival of new legislation, audiences are shifting from information gatherers who appreciate crisp text to federal managers responding to legislative mandate. Now, the site’s purpose has shifted as well: www.plainlanguage.gov must provide counsel and direction to federal workers. To do that, it requires a new architecture.

Frankly, I’m surprised. I did not expect to go into one morning of user testing and leave with the assurance that a site’s structure no longer works. I had not considered how the Clear Writing Act of 2010 would create a need to alter the site. I have never seen a site that worked one day, but then, following legislative change, worked no more.

Will the new architecture appear overnight? No. In the short term, volunteers from PLAIN will work to integrate new user demands into the current architecture. In the long term ... well, this much is for certain: sign me up as a volunteer. The site needs to evolve, and I’m happy to help.

Plainlanguage.gov needs to respond to its new “rhetorical” challenge, and this is where information architects help. If you want good user experience, your product must support audience, context and purpose – even when the users or their needs don’t stay the same.

For www.plainlanguage.gov, it’s time for change. ■