Content Strategy Report: Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder

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Introduction

This report is a summary of the content development project for the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder* website. The goal is to produce a website with improved usability and focused content. This report will cover the topics of background, purpose, preparation, user research during and after content development, the development of a prototype, final user research and project conclusions.
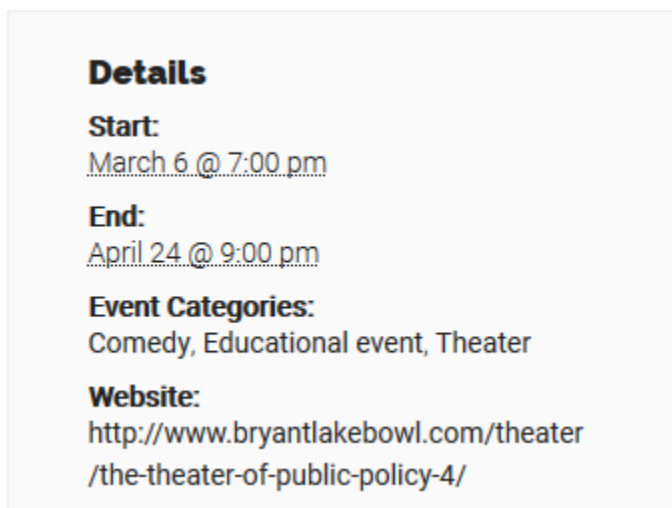
This site was chosen because it had a lot of content but lacked a user-friendly look and feel. The site also has competing focus. There are a for-profit newspaper and a non-profit community support organization. They share the same name with the non-profit having the designation 501(C) (3). Throughout the main page; the two organizations are interweaved. It is difficult to separate the entities.
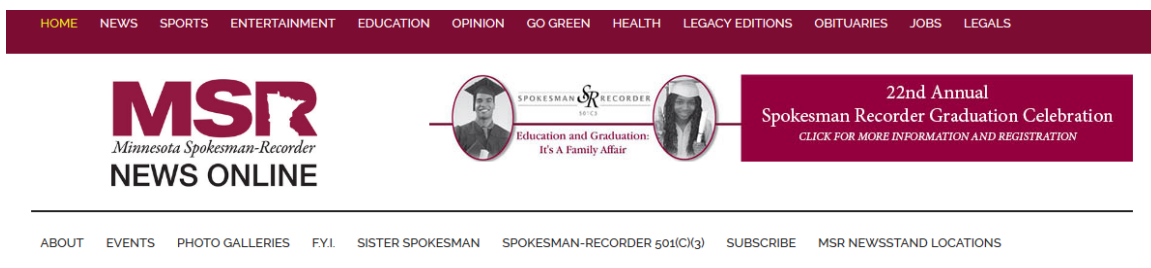
One of our first thoughts about the design was the twenty menu items across two navigation bars. It is in a file cabinet design with no calls to actions and links that did not open in a different tab or have breadcrumbs to lead back to the home or parent page.

Some of the menu items were content for the newspaper and others were for the content

of the non-profit.

As we dug deeper into the content, we discovered that the site made a lot of

assumptions about user knowledge. For example, there is a reoccurring event called the

Theater for Public Policy. ("About," n.d.) The date range and times are given, but it is

assumed that users would know where the event takes place and that the event is only on

Mondays. A hyperlink to an external site hints that the event is associated with the

Bryant Lake Bowl location.

Details

Start:
March 6 @ 7:00 pm

End:
April 24 @ 9:00 pm

Event Categories:
Comedy, Educational event, Theater

Website:
http://www.bryantlakebowl.com/theater
/the-theater-of-public-policy-4/

We decided on two objectives, reduce navigation effort and segregate content.

Purpose

We looked at the company mission statement as stated below and also considered

the feelings and concerns of the user. We felt that the content was timely, but the

presentation was cluttered and passive in nature. We felt the layout didn't facilitate

empowerment as well as it could have.

"The mission of the MSR is to provide timely original news stories and information that brings about greater awareness understanding and empowerment for our readers and the communities we serve."("About," n.d.)

By analyzing customer and company needs, we can see where the value of the content, the usability of the site, and the available resources intersect. One of our first tasks was to produce an analysis sheet (Appendix 1) of the current site. We categorized the content looked for content that was repeated, dated, or possibly have a location that would not be intuitive to a new user. Another tool we used to help analyze user and company needs was a value add proposition (Appendix 2), This helped us understand what the users wanted to get out of the site and what content helped or hindered their ability to achieve their goal. This analysis was also done with the company perspective in mind.

To keep from duplicating work,assure tasks were completed in a timely manner, control the format and consistency of content, and clearly indicate who had what role in the project we developed a governance document (Appendix 3). Also included in this document is a content location and structure guides, stylesheets, & key performance indicators. Some of the structure rules include how far an article's jump page should be from the beginning of the story, picture size restrictions and formatting, and the default font for pages.

Preparation

We had some beginning assumptions of the user.

- The user was interested in the local Black community

- The user was familiar with the use of a web browser

- The users were over the age of 12

- Users came to the site for a wide variety of reasons

- Users would get frustrated with difficult navigation

We started our survey preparation by designing an initial questionnaire that would develop a profile of the respondent (Appendix 4). With those questions answered, we then designed tasks that would require the skill and knowledge level of the users. If the users were able to complete the tasks with little or no difficulty, then we were likely on the right track.Since our focus was on navigation and content separation, we had two tasks where the content type was given and a third where the user had to find the content type (Appendix 5).

We were primarily interested in how the users understood the labeling, where their gaze rested and whether they got the results they were expecting. We hoped that in our initial redesign, we were thinking of the site in terms of how a user would want to navigate and have content where the user expected it to be.

Tools

We utilized Axure RP version 8 to develop the wireframes, and developed the prototype in Justinmind. They were both fairly easy to use, and Axure is free for student use. It features drag and drop and has plenty of widgets, forms, templates, and other design items. Justinmind has similar features, however making dynamic panels was far easier, so creating the navigation bars and setting actions was smoother than in Axure.

Prototype Development

As we developed the prototype, we discovered several areas for improvement. The multiple navigaton bars were a starting pointing. There are still two, however the top one only includes a way to subscribe, the log in widget, locations feature, and a search bar. We have moved all of the different newspaper sections into the second navigation bar, which has been simplified by category and use of scroll over and drop down menus. We added Google Maps hyperlinks to the addresses of the newsstand locations. Now when a user clicks on the address, a Google map of the location is presented in a pop-up window. We created a Community menu item and rolled up several items under those menus. This design reduced the number of menus and allowed for a single navigation bar. We shrunk the main logo so that viewers will be drawn to the hero and navigation content. We intended to have breadcrumbs on the site for easier navigation and are still trying to get that to work. We made "subscribe" accessible and prominent, as MSR looks to gain loyalty through repeat visitors.

We added a login section so that people could create a profile which will allow them to update their personal information, security settings, such as their password. They would also be able to update their subscription information, pay for their subscription, and gift a subscription to family or friends.   Eventually, they would be able to tailor their content so that if they are not interested in Sports, they could hide that menu item. Another possible feature of the Login section would be the ability to joina discussion group or commentary section that could be placed at the end of select content.

The community menu leads to a couple different community engagement pages, including an open forum that would allow users to upload announcements and items for sale in a Craigslist © format. The menu labels are updated to be a call to action items based on company and user goals. The format can be friendly and still formal, such as "Catch up with the News" or "Find Local Events."

Usability

We had two Millennial users and one Baby-Boomer user. All three found the navigation was more useful than the original site. The users thought the hyperlinks for the newsstand addresses was especially helpful. One of the users had scrolled all the way to the bottom of the home page while looking for a link that would take her to a job ad. She was looking for a "Jobs" or "Careers" label. We had all the ads rolled up under the menu item Classifieds, and she explained that most people think of classified ads as things for sale and such. A canvas of the other two users reported the same thought.

The users provided a few site suggestions that we mayincorporate.

- Highlight or bold on mouse hover – didn't have that working in prototype

- Larger font for content – likely not change due to mobile device design

- Contrast the menu items (alternate a light/dark scheme), so they have more separation than the current menu items – we think padding would likely work better

- Put graphics on menu items like a newspaper for the News item

Post Research

We should have included active completion sentences. One example would be "When I clicked on the News link, I expected _____."Our questions should have been task-oriented instead of navigation oriented.We didn't ask if the content they found was useful for completing the task.

Overall, the users reported easy navigation with most concerns being the makeup of the labeling. A couple of users clicked on pages that had not been completed yet. It would have been great to have the Login section working and test the usability of that feature.

Conclusion

We went into this project thinking only of improving the design of the site and hadn't given much thought to the value proposition. As we conducted both research and prototype development, we found that we had to go back to our value proposition several times to ensure what we were changing would add usability and value.

Governance is also something we initially did not prioritize. As we started having more changes, it quickly became apparent that managing the content was very important and we struggled until we made the same page and got on it. Alyssa and I seemed to mesh well and generally agreed on the direction our project took.