

USER-CENTERED WEBSITE DESIGN – REALITY CHECK

Web design ideally focuses on meeting user requirements.
This insight is gradually being accepted in practice.

By Andrea Stojanov



Taking user requirements into account in a website or application may sound self-evident. However, this principle is in fact not always easy to put into practice with large company websites. That is because the websites often serve many purposes that are given priority over the user. Here are three of the stumbling blocks most often encountered in practice.

Stumbling block 1: The user – an unfamiliar creature

When you ask the person responsible for business who the target audience for a new website or section of a website will be, you often get this answer: «Everyone of course.» Or a discussion follows about who the company's most important internet target group is.

In my experience the question itself is not asked correctly. In contrast to classic marketing, it is not so much about who the users are (age, gender, origins, etc.), but more about what they are supposed to do on the website. Nobody goes to a company website just to read. As a rule the user wants to find an address, download a report, conduct data research, find a job and so on. The more easily and quickly the user can accomplish this goal, the more satisfied he or she will be – which in turn has a positive impact on the company's image. The usability expert Gerry McGovern for example found that only a few «top tasks» have a significant influence on user-friendliness.

Agreement on the user objectives (tasks) is often easier to reach than a consensus about a demographic target group description, which does not really help us much in web design.

About Andrea Stojanov

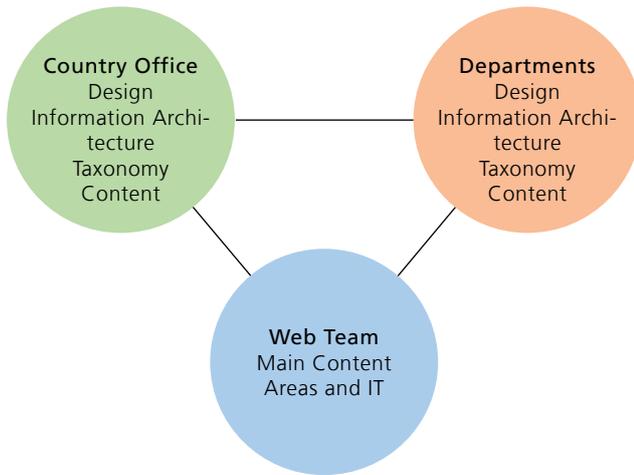
Dr. Andrea Stojanov is Head of Digital Communication with the Asian Development Bank in Manila. In this function, she manages the company website among other things. Information management, usability and information architecture are topics of special interest to her. She has worked as a consultant for the web projects of telecommunication firms and banks, and has been responsible for intranets and company websites in international organizations (UN, OSCE, ADB) since 10 years.

We can describe virtual personas on the basis of the specific objectives. Fictitious names, attitudes (adept, impatient, detail-oriented, etc.) and objectives are assigned to them so they provide good orientation for information architects, developers and editors.

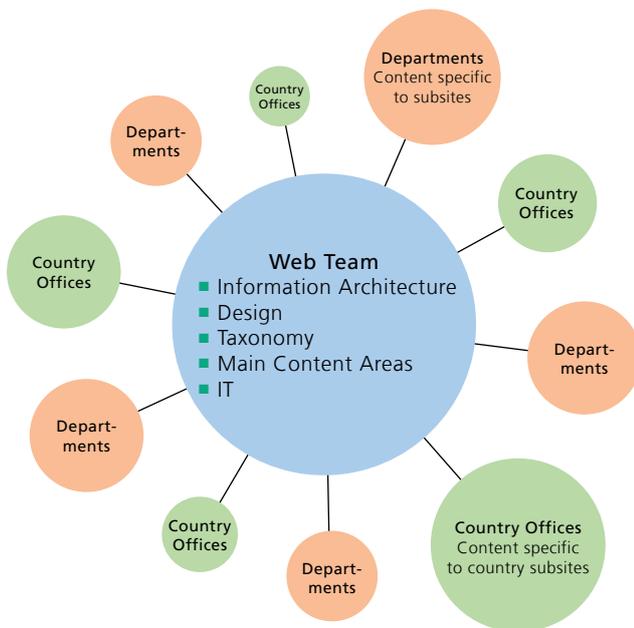
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Stumbling block 2: «Small kingdoms» block the view of the user

In some companies, the management of the company or internal website is highly decentralized. Departments manage sub-sites under their own responsibility and usually have their



Decentralized structure: Risk of a heterogeneous appearance.



Hybrid structure: Departments are responsible for content, the web team for the overall appearance.

own web budget as well. Very often this results in a heterogeneous information architecture and taxonomy. Even for important terms such as PIN or password, different words may be used from one page to the next.

In my experience, a hybrid management structure is the solution most easily implemented in practice: A central web team representing the interests of the users is responsible for a uniform information architecture, taxonomy and editorial guidelines. The departments focus on the content, which they enter into a content management system according to defined rules.

Personas provide good orientation for the transition from a decentralized to a hybrid management structure as well. As with all change processes, management support is also indispensable.

Stumbling block 3: The «web designers» in upper management

Website design also gets tricky when the designer wants to take all of upper management's ideas and wishes into account. The various perspectives and priorities reveal themselves rather quickly here.

More attention is often paid to colors than they really deserve. «Like/don't like» is an argument frequently given more weight than actual usability considerations. Then there is the battle over scarce space on the homepage: Some managers believe that they are unimportant if «their» topic is not represented there. Whether this topic is actually of interest to the user is a minor point. The results of user surveys, website statistics and personas – with a dose of patience – usually help convince the «web designers» in upper management.

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Conclusion

User-centered design has become so important with the spread of mobile devices that it has changed the way software is developed. Rather than technical possibilities, user requirements serve as the starting point for the engineer today. This paradigm shift should boost awareness of user-centered design on a broad basis ... and also clear away some of the stumbling blocks in the web design process. ■

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