

Creating Valuable Oilfield Websites



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The ways your organization can create value may vary depending on how your customers utilize the resources you provide. Online resources are largely utilized by your customers and employees alike, especially so companies in the oil and gas industry with international and diverse audiences. Meaningful, action-oriented conversations with Web site users about their online experience are critical for the successful development of your organization's Web-based tools.

In response to the growing importance of oil and gas industry Web sites over the past decade, Gelb has developed a proprietary research technique called Blitz User Testing. This technique is so named because several users are concurrently interviewed in a single session while using the Web site(s) or prototype. This provides marketers and web developers with immediate insights regarding their Web site and how it can be improved to enhance its value. In this paper we review the process of Blitz User Testing. We also provide a case study for how we have used this research technique in conjunction with an oil and gas organization to make Web site improvements. With this methodology, your organization can coordinate your Web development strategy and brand around the most meaningful points of impact.

We believe that online improvements must involve consistent design and navigation with the content written in a user-focused manner. Such enhancements increase end-user satisfaction, productivity, and successful completion of tasks. They also decrease long-term development, training, and support costs. By managing this key touchpoint, marketers can positively affect loyalty and the organization's competitive edge.

Listen to Users to Build a Comprehensive Strategy

As an example, Gelb worked with a major oilfield services company to review the, functionality, design, content, and navigation for customers (website) and employees (intranet). The challenge faced was how to best deploy limited resources against the unique needs of each of these audiences. At the start of our work, each product line and region had responsibilities for creating web-based content. This created a mix of messages, interfaces, and tools. The net result is online touchpoints weren't managed as part of a consistent brand and users were continually dissatisfied.

This client desired to address these issues by restructuring their Web sites. They also sought to improve their understanding of their users and their behaviors. This information, once captured, could then guide restructuring efforts.

These efforts chartered under the belief that any changes should focus on users' needs and work habits. Gelb used Blitz User Testing to incorporate the "voice of the customer" through firsthand conversation uncovering users' experiences.

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Beyond Traditional Methods

An imperative objective of this study was to create needs-based profiles of employees and customers when accessing the Web. We employed Blitz User Testing, which allowed for one-on-one interaction with each user within the different identified groups. This qualitative methodology uncovers users' information needs and usage behaviors. It was selected due to several benefits:

- This technique enables the interactive team to engage users before, during and after website use, providing a holistic view of their online experience
- Facilitators observe website/prototype usage, gauge reactions, and ask thought-provoking questions (e.g., reasoning behind activities, expectations) to accelerate their insight-development process
- By participating actively in the process, teams generate potential strategies and test those in current/subsequent sessions

For this oilfield service company, sessions were conducted with internal and external users. Sessions were held at locations around the global oilfield at operational centers in Southeast Asia, Canada, Houston, North Sea, and Brazil. Employee users involved in this study comprised of engineers, designers, manufacturers, and executives. Customer users consisted of managers, engineers, geologists, and geophysicists. Discussions centered on current uses, likes/dislikes, and recommendations for industry and the organization's Web sites.

Our Listening Process

To initiate the process, we developed a workbook for the group moderator and individual facilitators to follow. The workbook included a general discussion with users (Discovery), a series of tasks (Immersion), and a wrap-up discussion (Reflection). Using this workbook as a framework, Gelb then trained our client's facilitators regarding the process and methods to elicit rich user feedback.



Discovery began by talking to all users as a group. Much like a focus group we explained the purpose of the session and the expectations of participants. Then users were asked to provide their informational needs that would cause them to turn to the Web, and which sites they frequently consult at work. Their discussions concentrated on broad usage information and then focused on their individual needs.

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Immersion asked individuals to utilize with the Web site(s). Users were paired with individual facilitators including staff from the marketing and communications teams. The facilitators provided tasks, recorded user actions, and discussed potential recommendations for improvement. All observations were recorded for future analysis.

Users were first asked to locate the company's Web site home page they used. External users were directed to the company's public site while internal users were directed to the company's Intranet hosted site. Then users were requested to visit the areas of the pages they frequent. This common point of reference was valuable to our team as users were able to show what was most useful about these areas and offer recommendations for improvement regarding dislikes.

Users were then asked to find specific areas and pieces of information, determined by whether they were an internal or external user, on the Web site. The tasks were carefully scripted to reflect realistic activities such as finding information on events, technical product details, and finding technical experts. All the while, facilitators noted their actions and opinions.

These interactive tasks with continuous probing transformed the research exercise into a conversation between our facilitators and users.

Reflection concluded the session with a general discussion among users about their online experience. Users compiled a list of likes, dislikes, and recommendations regarding the particular Web site they experienced. They were also asked to compare the company's Web site they reviewed to other online resources.

Our team along with the client synthesized all the findings into several key categories including content, design, navigation and functionality/tools. By conducting several groups, we were able to compare and contrast the value users placed on specific information.

What We Learned

The initial group discussion provided us with guidance on how visitors frequent the organization's Web sites and also prescriptions on what made these valuable.

External users' use of the external site was for educational, troubleshooting, and technical purposes. They valued the site's technically specific information, organization by technical challenge, and its provision of other users' concerns. Online alternatives to this site included search engines, competitor sites, and oil and gas organization sites.

Internal users relied on the internal site for career development and information regarding contacts, human resources, and technical requests, but also on a limited basis. Of value to this group was locally and professionally relevant information that was easy to find. They frequently turned to other sites such as regional company sites or reached out to personal contacts for information.

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During the completion of tasks, external users experienced particular difficulty finding valuable information. For example, when they did find information like the link to contact the organizations, they commented the process was tedious and responses were slow. While internal users did not have as much trouble, which was attributed to recently implemented search engine on the internal site, they remained unaware of the site's full capabilities. Both groups of users reported low expectations for the company's online resources. Internal users, for example, explained they simply turn to other online resources to find needed information.

User input allowed us to rate the value of the sites' different capabilities. Educational resources were of high value to internal users but only moderate value to external users. Technically specific and personally relevant information, as well as updated content were of moderate value to all users. Finally, global content and contact information was of low value to all users, too.

Online content desired by users



Users recommended both sites' undergo changes. External users requested a more engaging and educational interface that would persuade them to do more than just "scan" the site. They viewed the external site as more of an advertisement than an informative resource with helpful tools.





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Additional guidance to key site areas was desired by internal users as the current version was too cluttered and not immediately relevant to their needs. They explained that the excessive amount of content included on each page was confusing. With links not bolded and layouts differing from page to page, they found themselves scrolling through more information than they would have like to find what they needed. Internal users explicated that they instead bookmark sites they regularly reference instead of trying to locate them on the internal site.

Actions and Results

Each of our sessions yielded a wealth of insight regarding users' experiences. We organized our individual notes to generate a list of action items to refine the existing Web sites. These items were grouped into categories of Design, Navigation, Content, and Functionality/Tools.

Evaluation

Website Performance	Internal Site	External Site
 Design	Users want a more engaging interface to notice content and more graphics; this will like keep users committed beyond initial "scanning"	Look and feel is appropriate, but users need more direction to key areas; users find the website pages too cluttered and lose focus
 Navigation	Current navigation stymies users looking for solutions and investigating products; therefore, customers see the website as a an advertisement, not a customer resource	Users find it difficult to find relevant content through search and navigation bars; consequently, employees are not aware of the breadth of content available
 Content	Emphasize engineering over marketing in content presentation; users are asking for a more educational tone	Content is rich, but needs more individual relevance; users appear to learn how to do one thing, but that is all
 Functionality	Customers are looking for engineering tools and searches by challenges	Contact information tools and technical functionality are unsatisfactory; users are seeking more day-to-day usefulness

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The findings from this study fueled a second round of research. Data collected through Blitz User Testing was considered in designing an online quantitative survey to further uncover individual usage and preferences regarding the sites. Using this methodology, 3,949 screened and qualified responses were collected. These responses helped us identify user groups, understand how each uses the two Web sites, and ascertain what changes to the sites were most needed.

Based on both the quantitative and qualitative research efforts, modifications were made to both sites. Implementation of these began even before the full completion of the project. For example, the organization took swift steps to provide in its external site an automatic courtesy response email to individuals reaching out via the site's "Contact Us" form. To the internal site, icons were added to the home page navigation system as internal users specified they preferred such.

Considerations

The process is comfortable for users and facilitators alike. It provides a casual atmosphere in which the organization can listen to and interact with customers and employees. Not only is the feedback candid but also immediate—making it unnecessary to wait for a final report before taking action.

It can be difficult to recruit the right types of users for involvement in sessions. It can also be arduous to consistently involve the same facilitator teams. This created some difficulty in our wrap-up sessions, as each facilitator had not heard from users of all Web sites. This made drawing out key themes more difficult.

Implications

- **Strategic.** It is important for your design and programming teams to hear, first-hand, what users think about their product. This will help them develop a greater sense of empathy to drive decisions.
- **Navigation.** Oil & gas companies are looking for solutions and investigating products. It is therefore important to make the navigation as easy as possible and simplify search and navigation bars. Offering a crumb trail would allow users to more easily navigate sites as well.
- **Content.** Individual relevance is paramount to oil & gas users. Emphasize engineering over marketing, while not overwhelming users with too much information. Detailing procedures and products is useful, but content should be self-explanatory, consistent, and, if possible, avoid dense, undefined terminology.
- **Design.** The design should be consistent so that users can easily navigate all pages on your Web site. Provide users with ample guidance, sizable font, and graphics so that key

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areas are easy to locate. Bolded text and links assists users in recognizing relevant information.

- **Functionality/Tools.** Contact information, product comparison, and events are often prominent reasons as to why oil & gas users turn to your site. Ensure tools such as these are current. Also require one log-in for users for increased productivity.

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About Endeavor

Endeavor Management, is an international management consulting firm that collaboratively works with their clients to achieve greater value from their transformational business initiatives. Endeavor serves as a catalyst by providing pragmatic methodologies and industry expertise in Transformational Strategies, Operational Excellence, Organizational Effectiveness, and Transformational Leadership.

Our clients include those responsible for:

- Business Strategy
- Marketing and Brand Strategy
- Operations
- Technology Deployment
- Strategic Human Capital
- Corporate Finance

The firm's 40 year heritage has produced a substantial portfolio of proven methodologies, deep operational insight and broad industry experience. This experience enables our team to quickly understand the dynamics of client companies and markets. Endeavor's clients span the globe and are typically leaders in their industry.

Gelb Consulting Group, a wholly owned subsidiary, monitors organizational performance and designs winning marketing strategies. Gelb helps organizations focus their marketing initiatives by fully understanding customer needs through proven strategic frameworks to guide marketing strategies, build trusted brands, deliver exceptional experiences and launch new products.

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