Canadian Evaluation Society
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Interactive Media Consultants

Examination of most information highway locations tends to direct focus towards certain Web site expectations. These expectations strongly influence what the evaluation level of that Web site will be. Will the Web site prompt a return visit? How easy was the Web site to use? Did it provide the user with the necessary information? How easy was it to locate the Web site? The answers to these and other related questions affect the evaluation of a Web site's overall performance.

Perhaps one of the first expectations that anyone has for a Web site is finding it. People's expectations for a Web site designed to provide a broad base of information is that even without typing in a "specific" name, a Web site location will appear which is most relevant to the search that is performed. People tend to click on one of the first 10 hits for a search, so it is important that either your Web site or a Web site with your link prominently displayed comes up early in a search. Ensuring that related Web sites display your link will also enhance overall traffic and Web site satisfaction.

When a Web site is located, perhaps the first thing that attracts a user is the overall layout of that site. A Web site that is appealing will have a longer lasting affect than one that is sterile in appearance. Web sites that have a highly interactive opening web page complete with clearly labeled links and a strong focused introduction is more likely to create interest and use than a purely text based web page. Having made this point, the legitimacy of the organization contacted may also have a great deal of influence as to whether or not the user continues to use the Web site. Even if legitimacy is strongly prevalent, failure to ensure a popular approach to Internet surfing may decrease the likelihood of repeat users. Users may question the rationale of

using that site when a bookmark to a preferred site will suffice. What purpose can a Web site truly have if it does not seem to inform its user? If the information gained is wholly in a unidirectional forum, directing the user away from the site, the legitimacy of that site's existence may be questioned.

Wholly related to the notion of having an appealing Web site is the notion of being user friendly. An individual who visits a Web site wants to be able to navigate in an efficient manner. Navigating in an efficient manner translates partly into the speed with which a Web site operates. One of the greatest detractors for any Web Site is a slow transmittal of information. Efficient navigation also translates into providing Internet links with adequate direction as to where they lead. The obverse is no only futile but assists in frustrating the user. Providing text might be all that is required to greatly reduce user frustration. Arranging internal Internet links in an organized fashion also adds to user satisfaction. Providing an internal Web site data and information base outside of external Internet links may also improve the level of evaluation for the Web site. The information provided in the internal information should be clear and descriptive in nature. A fine tuned search engine always improves an individual's evaluation of a Web site. That is to suggest that the search engine should operate based on a pointed scope rather than on a broad and frivolous scale. Being directed to pointless lists and odd policy papers do not enhance the overall perception of a Web site. It is also fair to suggest that clearly labeled categories need to be provided and even if one particular link perceptually falls under several headings, the user should be able to find the link in several places.

It is also fair to suggest that any Web site should provide a general site map, which many browsers prefer. It is also vitally important to provide an indication of when material on that

Web site was last up-dated which helps the user ascertain the relevance of the information provided. Ensuring that information is up-dated also means the decreased likelihood that links may not be functioning, and at least provide the user with some notification that a problem exists and is being rectified. Providing a clearly hyper-linked email address for any questions, suggestions, or problems also adds to an improved perception of a Web site. However, having made this point, it becomes frivolous to provide such an address if the issuing organization fails to promptly respond to inquiries. Once again failure to ensure an appropriate response time will increase user dissatisfaction and ensure decreased repeat visitors.

From a Canadian perspective (or any other nationality for that matter) it is vitally important to ensure that the major cultural groups have fair access to the Web site material. Ensuring language equality is one obvious example. Having made this point it should become acutely obvious for organizations on the Internet that globalization pervades much of modern society. If an organization is to truly enhance their global prospects from a business, social, and cultural perspective it seems increasingly important to provide various language links so that individuals from other countries may be able to avail of the information provided on the Web site. It may not be prudent to provide language links for all the known languages of the world, but certainly identifying some of the major languages (German, Japanese, English, French) will enhance a Web site's ability to be an effective venue.

One of the most important points for any Internet user is security. Web sites that try to offer the most to their users often try to provide interactive forums. These forums may take shape of specific programs for which a user may register for or simply chat-lines on which people can

participate. If an organization is to ensure maximum satisfaction for the user, and positive evaluation from that same user, taking steps to alleviate fears of security will greatly enhance the perception of the Web site. Not only does improved security ally user fears; it also enhances site legitimacy. Individuals tend to have a much more positive perception of a Web site when they know that that Web site has taken their personal well being into consideration.

In assessing the Canada Place Web site there are many objectives on which to base the analysis. The credo of Canada Place is visibility, excitement, innovation, access and connections. These are very important objectives that should be met. Other objectives for Canada Place include the provision of one-stop access and broader reach through the attraction of global Internet users.

Currently, visibility is a key objective. In order to stand out amongst the vast array of information provided on the Internet, Canada Place must market itself very well. This may be achieved through numerous links on other Canadian and Government related Web sites as well as listings on key search engines. Furthermore, Canada Place should emphasize their Internet presence and the services provided through their Internet site. This can be done throughout the Canada Place centres in Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Ottawa, Montreal, Edmonton, and Moncton as well as through various PR/advertising campaigns.

The Canada Place Internet site must be exciting. In order to be exciting the site must be well organized, attractive, and very informative. If the site is poorly organized, not up-to-date and unattractive, viewers are unlikely to continue using the site. Additionally, if the site is not informative then there will be no incentive for individuals to make future visits and no incentive

for individuals to recommend the site to others. Furthermore, to create an exciting site the creators must consider exactly what it is that society would like to see on their Web site. What are the needs of its viewers? Clearly, Canada Place must devise some method of asking its users what services and information they would like, or expect, to be provided on their Web site. While a Web site may be perceived to be exciting in the eyes of the creators, it may not necessarily be exciting in the eyes of the end-user.

Innovation is a key objective as the site can tap into new and innovative technologies to provide its users with better service. For example, technology today allows companies to provide many of their services over the Internet. This is of tremendous value to consumers who are looking for convenient service. Canada Place needs to increase their efforts into the provision of these innovative service offerings. This can be done through new service offerings such as the proposed grants and contributions web site enhancement.

The creation of a one-stop centre for information pertaining to Canada should be another objective of Canada Place. This requires extensive information offerings. Additional information that Canada Place may consider providing includes links to Canadian businesses and business information, links to Canadian history, and links to better tourist information. The proposed link to business would include general information such as economic information, corporate information, industry information and information on exchange rates. Currently, Canada Place is considering setting up a tourism section on their Web site. In the list of proposed information services to be offered there seems to be a heavy concentration on information pertaining to national parks while there is a lack of information provided about other

national landmarks and tourist destinations within Canada. Clearly, this section does not provide a one-stop information centre. In order to gather information on things such as where to stay, potential tourists need to tap into other resources.

One final objective of Canada Place should be to broaden its reach to a global level. One alternative to achieve this objective is to include links from the Canada Place Web site to other foreign governments around the world. Conversely, the Canada Place Web site can be linked from other foreign government Web sites around the world. This would provide information to consumers or businesses who may be considering travelling to or setting up operations in other countries. It would also educate others world wide about Canada and promote the country.

There are several indicators that may be used to determine the success of a web site. Length of stay may be determined through a timing device that allows Canada Place to determine when the visitor first logged onto the site, and when they move on to another site. This also relates to another benefit of keeping most of the links internal to the site. If a link is external to the site, it is more difficult to determine if the visitor has left the site due to low satisfaction or if they simply moved to a Canada Place link that was external to the site. Unless these links become internal, Canada Place must form an agreement with its external links to be provided with information of the number of "hits" they received from visitors who linked to their site directly from the Canada Place Web site. This may be achieved through the use of cookies. The length of stay on these other sites as a result of a visit to the Canada Place site could be considered part of the stay on the Canada Place site. The assumption made is that the length of overall stay indicates satisfaction with the site. That is, a longer stay should indicate greater satisfaction.

However, it should be noted that such a measure would best be used in conjunction with another performance indicator. Otherwise, it is difficult to determine if length of stay is due to satisfaction, shear size of the site, or difficulty in finding information.

Another measure of performance would be the actual number of visits to the site, which can be determined by a counter. A greater number of "hits" to this site may indicate that more people are visiting the site for information because they could not find it elsewhere, or because Canada Place successfully marketed itself as a one-stop site for Canadian information. This would be especially indicative of the Canada Place credos of visibility, access, and connections. Even more revealing, with the use of cookies, Canada Place could determine if a visitor is a repeat user of the site. Repeat usage is more revealing in that it is a more confident indicator of satisfaction.

Once inside the site, visits to specific pages (measured by counters on each individual page) may show those services for which the site is most often used, allowing Canada Place to approximate which audiences it is reaching, and where it needs to increase its promotion.

To determine the extent to which key objectives are actually achieved could be ascertained from those Web site performance indicators, provided that the site itself contains information that is representative of the key objectives. If the structure and content of the site is consistent with the Canada place objectives, then it should follow that positive results from the indicators given above should indicate a positive correlation with achievement of these key objectives.

However, a more direct measure of achievement may be obtained through the use of feedback forms. It is stated that "…71 percent of Canadians have indicated the use of technology to undertake public consultations" (Ekos, Information Highway Study, 1999). This characterizes the Canadian audience as one that may be receptive to the participation in such a survey. Close monitoring of e-mail and the examination of specific and "most frequent" questions may also provide Canada Place with a more direct indicator about its shortfalls and strengths.

While Canada Place has taken an important step towards achieving their mandate, there is much improvement that could be done, specifically to its Web site. Canada Place Web site needs to work towards creating a more interactive and exciting forum through which its users may benefit. Diversifying the appearance of material and resources available will help create a more appealing and user-friendly Web-based environment.