

ACE BREAKOUT SESSION: “WEB PAGES NEED EDITING, TOO”

(6/22/04)

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BEFORE ☹

- CSREES focus was on print-based materials.
- Our old Web site wasn’t editorially sound.
- No procedures were in place to make it such.
- Language was often “bureaucrat-ese.”
- Communicators had little if any authority.
- Site had no consistent content focus.
- “Rogue pages” had different look-and-feel.
- Content varied widely from page to page.
- Many pages were seldom updated.
- Staff was frustrated by slowness of process.
- Site was embarrassing and seldom accessed.

AFTER ☺

- Web site is now our primary communications tool.
- Editorial integrity is now paramount.
- Rigorous procedures are now in place.
- “Plain language” is emphasized.
- Communicators are now the official gatekeepers.
- CSREES programs are now the chief focus.
- All program pages now have same look-and-feel.
- Content now consistently presented for reader ease.
- All pages are reviewed and re-dated regularly.
- Changes go up quickly; staff is involved directly.
- Site now source of pride; “hits” are up dramatically.

HOW WE GOT FROM “BEFORE” TO “AFTER”

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Agency reorganized and put Communications Staff in Administrator’s Office.
- Webmaster was reassigned from IT Staff to Communications Staff.
- Administrator supported new Web site development with funding and staffing and endorsed the concept of editorial integrity.
- Communications Director reassigned staff from other duties to develop and maintain Web site and created new positions as needed.

PRE LAUNCH (1½ YEARS)

- CS developed an agency style guide* for all public outputs, including the Web site.
- CS Director supported 2-day Web writing training for 8 CS staff members, followed by abbreviated sessions on Web writing that were open to all agency staff. One quarter of agency attended.
- CS developed and distributed program page author guidelines*, which included key points of above training as reminders. Stressed need to keep writing level appropriate to intended audiences.
- Web team defined structure of site for editorial effectiveness and common look-and-feel.
- Five Communications Staff editors were each assigned about 12 program pages to develop with program specialists. A program page owner (PPO) was named and trained for each program page, with responsibility for both pre- and post-launch management of content.
- Senior editor was designated to take the lead on overall editorial integrity.
- Content development team met weekly to discuss and formulate Web site policies and procedures.
- Copy was submitted in two rounds, and content feedback was provided by the editor after each round.
- Executive editor and senior editor reviewed all pages and often asked for rewrites.
- CS Director agreed to hire temporary outside editor to review all final program pages prior to launch, using Word tracking. Senior editor sent/received all final files by e-mail and reviewed each on return.
- Senior editor reviewed all program pages again in the last two weeks before launch to look for errors or inconsistencies resulting from the electronic postings, and those missed earlier.

*For a copy, send an e-mail to dmcallister@csrees.usda.gov by July 2 or jsnyder@csrees.usda.gov after July 2.

POST LAUNCH (ONGOING)

- PPOs send (by e-mail) changes and new material to Web managing editor, who involves the senior editor to do editorial review. Database available to PPOs to initiate simple changes to program pages.
- Same five program editors are responsible for working with PPOs on developing new editorial content. Senior editor involves editors as needed or approves minor changes himself.
- CS staff actively monitors site every week for outdated content and removes or works with PPOs to revise.
- Pages periodically get a new “reviewed” date at the bottom, even if no changes need to be made.

(over)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Web sites are communication vehicles—and they need the same rigorous editorial attention you’ve traditionally given to publications, news releases, and audiovisual products.
2. As communication vehicles—and increasingly an institution’s primary one—Web sites need to be under the ultimate authority and purview of Communications Offices. Get the support of your administrators.
3. As such, only Communications staff members should be allowed to post—or authorize posting—Web material to a live server, and then only after it’s had the benefit of a thorough editing.
4. If you don’t have a style guide that covers the unique titles and other peculiarities of your institution, make one and insist that all communicators use it consistently.
5. Educate your page owners about how effective Web writing differs from traditional print-based writing.
6. There’s room for both speed and accuracy in Web postings. Both deserve utmost attention.
7. Provide your authors with written guidelines on how to prepare and submit Web site material.
8. Encourage them to review their existing material regularly and display a reasonably current review date.
9. At least one senior editor should check every new or revised page before it goes up on the live server.
10. Have a system for monitoring all pages on your site on a regular basis and make recommendations to page owners when something looks like it needs to be revised or removed.

The URL for the new CSREES Web site is www.csrees.usda.gov.