

Corporate Identity and the web: What your homepage tells about your organization

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Abstract. In the literature you find a lot of hints concerning web design and usability of web pages. But how do you compare web pages? Which ones are good or bad? What does a homepage say about your organization? This paper is based on research over the last couple of years and uses linguistic strategies to analyze electronic business communications - including newsletters and web sites. Unfortunately linguistics is usually not used very often for electronic communication theories, but the variety of theories and tools are a good starting point to find synergies between computer science, marketing and webdesign.

1. INTRODUCTION

First of all classic corporate identity theory speaks of three different areas:

- corporate design
- corporate communications
- corporate behavior

Unfortunately the web community synonymously uses corporate design and corporate identity, putting a very strong focus on the graphical side of the user interface. However, other factors are relevant as well. If we simply treat the communications part as the text supplied then the behavior becomes a separate issue.

Marketing theory would identify the appearance and activities of members of an organization as behavior, including sales and support personnel. How would we judge "web behavior"?

One of my hypotheses on this topic was that certain communication structures are better suited to the web than others. After comparing many different forms of organizational communication, two basic types were identified: :

- Hierarchical communications
- Human Relations

We all know Taylor's approach to work processes in the early days of industrialization. The management commanded and the workers had to obey. While I originally thought that this approach had vanished, I found out that this type of communication is still in use - especially in large companies. It is a one-way communication flow from the top to the bottom. No feedback is required or encouraged.

The other model is called "Human Relations" and is based on Mayo's studies at the Hawthorne site. An open approach to communication is suggested, providing better results and a more social atmosphere.

1.1. Alter Ego

Shannon and Weaver were the early pioneers of communications. Their model of "sender" and "receiver" provided a sound basis for scientific research in the early days. However human communication does not follow static rules. There is always the possibility of failure due to misunderstandings or unwillingness. Niklas Luhmann provided exactly the setting I was looking for. He describes two entities "Ego" and "Alter Ego" that - at first - do not know about each other but in the process of communication begin to establish not only a relationship but also an understanding of each other. So "good" communication becomes a series of successfully coupled transactions.

1.2. Organizational Communications and the Web

Both traditions seemed to be present in websites, but there was no way to identify which was which. So variables had to be defined. Which factors do support the coupling of communication transactions and which ones are counter-productive?

By extending the "openness" some indicators could be found:

- search function
- sitemap
- contact

The search function provides access to the whole site - the recipient is not forced to follow a specific path. The full potential of hyperlinks can be explored. A sitemap tells a visitor exactly where he is. This constitutes a further indicator of openness and helps to avoid the "lost in hyperspace" problem. If you accept that "Alter Ego" may choose any form of communication channel, then the contact on the web should not only include a web form but also phone numbers or fax. In addition to that people must be included. While webforms usually provide for faster processing, the anonymity often irritates users.

2. THE MODEL

By having identified variables that position a website as either hierarchical or human-related it becomes possible to compare web pages. The approach was used in different industries including aviation, IT and even politics. You can even find a correlation between web pages and election results. According to objective criteria (e.g. a search function is available) a web site can be scored and receives a ranking on a scale between "hierarchical" (= bad) or "human-relations" (=good).

2.1. The Variables

The research revealed that there are certain indicators that reveal the nature of a website. The data I choose had to be easily accessible. So each criterium had to be either present or absent. First of all I was looking for the clearest form of "openness" - which is providing a sitemap

and a search function. Both are not only a means for "ease of use" but also an indicator of the willingness to share details about the company.

Very important is the way an organization can be reached. Some web pages do not provide a contact point at all, others just provide an email address. Some provide web forms to be filled in. Research has shown that - according to Luhmann's model - the recipient should be free to choose the medium. So a web form allows for easy processing but not for free choice of contact. The ideal web site provides a contact person with an email and a phone number. Fax is nice, but seems to lose importance.

When we want to encourage people to get in touch, people should be presented on the page instead of machines or technology. This may cause trouble however for companies or organizations that are focused on technology only. Basic sales experience however shows that people buy from people.

Another important set of variables deals directly with interactivity. So a good forum or a guestbook is a very important means for enhancing a web site's interactivity. Many web sites simply exist because of excellent exchange between visitors.

In order to remind people to visit your web site, creating a newsletter is proven mechanism. However, many newsletters do not reach their audience. Again this is due to the fact that the user is free to choose his communication media. So if a newsletter is just a collection of brochures it becomes useless. Real interactivity does involve creating news and to be part of a communication process. Marketing experts would see a newsletter and the website as part of the marketing mix.

2.2. Hiding Information

Websites reveal a lot when you apply linguistic theories to them. One of them stems from the research work on racism. The theory on backgrounding and suppression can also be used for websites. Backgrounding means that the originator of an action cannot be easily identified. Suppression means that the originator information is not present at all. There is relevant information that is legally required or expected on websites. If this information is missing or cannot simply be found further investigation can reveal the communication model an organization uses.

2.3. Application of the Model

The model was used in different scenarios. It was used to compare business organizations and political parties. In this context the results can quickly be obtained - so I will use 2 examples of Austrian elections here to show the application of the evaluation model.

The first election took place in 2002 and the second in 2004. The scoring of the first election clearly showed that 2 parties were equal in terms of web communications and the 2 other did not do so well. The voting results gave the first 2 parties a very good position, the others scored not so good.

The presidential election in 2004 had just 2 candidates. One candidate had a perfect website - the other one lacked several details. There was, however, a very heavily promoted weblog. As we know, a weblog is not part of a dialog but rather part of a hierarchical communications model, which is not so useful for web communications. By ignoring the rules of a dialog-orientated communications model, this candidate did not win.

3. SUMMARY

As I have shown, the graphical design of a web site is not the only factor that contributes to effective communication. Linguistic theories should receive a much higher value in the judgement of electronic communications. The model that provides the highest adoption by the user is based on the openness of the "human relations" approach. While the web becomes an ubiquitous technical reality, human factors still dominate the communication process.

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