Implications of Audience on Web Development

Marc Comeau
Importance of Audience

As with any communication medium, the web requires a good understanding of those with whom you want to communicate.

All of the technological and multimedia options available for web development share one important feature:

They are all used to communicate with an audience.

But which ones work best? How do you make sure you’re reaching your audience properly?
So Who and What Are Your Audience

- On the web, an audience includes both real people and robots.
- Though robots are relatively predictable, they view the web very differently than people, so they are an important consideration.
- How do we see the web through the eyes of a robot?
- The closest approximation is Lynx.
- Let’s look at a couple of examples.
Real People

- Then there are the real people
  - Primary audience
  - Other audiences

- There are 2 major types of people when it comes to a web audience
  - The visitors you have
  - The visitors you don’t have
Identify Your Primary Audiences

This will either come from your intuition, your business plan or the website owner

Consider the Primary Audiences of

- www.webmasterworld.com
- www.google.com

Important to really understand the primary audiences because subtle differences can turn into significant design choices.
Related Sites Still Have Different Audiences

- Even when very closely related,
  - www.cs.dal.ca vs www.dal.ca
  - www.cs.dal.ca vs www.medicine.dal.ca

- Consider the sales vs. support portions of an e-commerce website
Current Visitors

Now that you know who you’re trying to reach with your website, you can investigate how closely your current visitors match the profile.

We can gather a great deal of information on our current visitors from Apache logs.

Use one of the many stats packages out there to get a broad overview:

- Awstats
- Webalizer
Problems with Statistics Packages

- Many statistics are interpreted and as a result aren’t 100% reliable
- Won’t get always get very detailed information on your audience (unless you spend a lot of money)
- Can’t tell you anything about people who aren’t coming to your site
How To Get Specific Details On Your Users

- Your favorite Unix tools
  - grep, tail, gawk, sort, uniq, etc...
  - Ultimate in flexibility
  - Cumbersome and limited to data in the log file
- Can use cookies
  - Unreliable
  - Can gather more information than you can get from log file
- Session Variables
  - More effort to develop
  - Can get very accurate path analysis data and more
Visitors You Don’t Have

- If you want your website to grow, ultimately you’ll have to draw more visitors.
- One of the biggest mistakes a webmaster can make is to think, “I don’t have to design for browser X, none of my visitors use it”.
- Like saying nobody in wheelchairs use a building when there’s no ramps to allow entry.
- So what’s the answer?
Accessibility

In a nutshell, it’s about making your website so that anyone can use it.

This is the one major technique that will make your website’s content available to as large a potential audience as possible.

Good accessibility practices will ensure that people with disabilities will have the opportunity to access your site, but it helps more than the disabled...
Accessibility Helps Others Too

- There are people who are partially or temporarily disabled
  - Poor eyesight
  - Sprained wrist
- Hardware issues as well
  - Fuzzy monitor
  - PDAs and Cell Phones
- Software
  - Lack of plugins
  - No support for client based scripting