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A new focus for a university: designing a web site to feature community service

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A NEW FOCUS FOR A UNIVERSITY:
DESIGNING A WEB SITE TO FEATURE
COMMUNITY SERVICE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

Andrea Louise Clesi
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1974
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ABSTRACT

This research used focus groups and usability testing to determine how a major land-grant university should design a Web site that would feature the community service work of faculty and staff, students and alumni, also referred to as stakeholders. University public relations professionals planned to launch an interactive Web site as part of the university's sesquicentennial celebration in 2010, but had concerns that the Web site would not attract stakeholders. The research sought to answer the following questions based on uses and gratifications and impression management theories: What uses and gratifications, if any, do social networking sites provide stakeholders? Does the university create the impression of "service" among stakeholders? What would motivate stakeholders to visit and/or participate in an interactive Web site on university service? The research also determined whether the prototype Web site was easy to use. Findings from focus groups indicated that stakeholders did not connect community service with the university, and therefore, a Web site that features community service poses few uses and gratifications for stakeholders. Findings from usability tests found the prototype was easy to use.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Louisiana State University Agriculture & Mechanical College will celebrate its 150th birthday, also known as the sesquicentennial. As an integral part of the celebration, the LSU Office of Communications and University Relations (LSUCUR) has proposed the establishment a Web site that will feature the volunteer work of LSU alumni, faculty and staff, and students. The preliminary title for the Web site is “LSU Serves the World.” LSUCUR has conceptualized an interactive Web site, a social networking site, which will provide a forum for the thousands connected with LSU to share information about their community service. LSU A&M, Louisiana’s flagship university, has a current student population of approximately 29,000, a faculty and staff of 5,197 and an alumni base of 114,000. For the first time, the university is ranked in the first tier of “Best National Universities” in the 2009 *U.S. News and World Report’s America’s Best Colleges* edition (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2008).

LSU A & M, one of 74 land-grant colleges in the United States, is a member of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2001). APLU is the nation’s oldest higher education association and is dedicated to advancing “research, learning and engagement” at land-grant universities. In 1996 APLU created the Kellogg Commission on the Future of Public and Land-grant Universities to “help define the direction public universities should go in the future and to recommend an action agenda to speed up the process of change” (Association, 2001). In a 2001 report entitled “Returning to Our Roots: Executive Summaries of the Reports of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-grant Universities,” the commission analyzed the concept of “the engaged institution.” The commission defined engaged institutions as “institutions that have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined” (Association, 2001, Executive Summaries section, para.6). The commission recommended that

“engagement” become a central part of institutional missions and suggested service-learning, outreach, and university-community partnerships as ways to “engage” with communities (Association, 2001, Executive Summaries section, para.24-28). Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006) noted that most universities “engage” their communities by increasing student access to community through student teaching, internships, and volunteer opportunities. Universities benefit from this exchange because students learn “real world” lessons as well as civic responsibility (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006, p.126).

LSU A & M Chancellor Michael V. Martin supports community engagement and its place as a part of LSU’s Flagship Agenda. At a Chancellor’s forum in the fall of 2008, Martin referred to the Kellogg Commission report on engaged universities. Martin said, “I am convinced the University has the capacity to serve more constituents than on-campus students, and I’ve become convinced that our community and state need this University to reach out to them. We can grow our population at LSU by serving our community and building bridges” (LSU Community Connections Newsletter, 2008, p.2).

As a way to engage, LSU A & M provides service-learning opportunities for students through the Center for Community Engagement-Learning-Leadership (CCELL). The LSU CCELL Web site describes service-learning as “a method of teaching and learning in which students fulfill the learning goals of their academic courses while serving the community” (LSU Center for Community Engagement, n.d., para.2). In 2008, approximately 2,700 students participated in 146 service-learning classes in 35 departments.

LSUA & M provides faculty, staff, and students with the opportunity to serve the campus and the community through the organization, Volunteer LSU. Campus student organizations also provide volunteer service opportunities for students. LSUCUR recognizes the fact that LSU graduates, who work in cities, states and countries around the world, also volunteer in their

communities. LSUCUR professionals want to gather information on community service from alumni as well as students, faculty and staff, via the proposed “LSU Serves the World” Web site, to be able to share it with the world on the World Wide Web.

LSUCUR wants to use the World Wide Web as a public relations tool to “spread the word” about faculty and staff community engagement and student and alumni voluntarism. The World Wide Web is the first mass medium that allows public relations professionals to communicate with stakeholders without having to go through media gatekeepers (White & Raman, 2000). Through the use of the proposed Web site, LSUCUR can reach thousands of stakeholders without the gatekeeper filter, and provide a forum for interactivity among those stakeholders.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

LSUCUR proposes to use the “LSU Serves the World” interactive Web site to spotlight alumni, faculty and staff, and students, referred to as stakeholders, who volunteer in communities across the globe. The Web site will allow the stakeholders to log their volunteer hours as well as upload photographs and video and write comments about their community service so that those visiting the Web site could see and read about their volunteer work. LSUCUR hopes that stakeholders will reach the goal of “150,000 hours served” during the sesquicentennial celebration in 2010. The LSUCUR staff, however, has concerns about attracting alumni, faculty and staff, and students to the proposed Web site. They are not sure if these stakeholders will be interested or motivated to participate in an interactive site. White and Raman’s 2000 study of Web site development found that in the haste to establish an Internet presence, public relations practitioners often ignored “the basic tenets of public relations research, planning, and evaluation” (White & Raman, 2000, p.416) in designing Web sites. White and Raman’s findings showed “that Web site planning is done by trial and error, based on intuition, with little or no

formal research” (White & Raman, 2000, p.416).

LSUCUR does not want to present a Web site without first determining, through research, stakeholder interest and motivation in such a site. Through the use of focus groups, I will provide LSUCUR with qualitative research analysis that will help with the planning, design, and development of the proposed Web site. Since the sesquicentennial celebration kicks off January 1, 2010, LSUCUR asked me to conduct the research and present findings in the spring of 2009. That time table provides them with several months to prepare and refine the “LSU Serves the World” Web site. After meeting with key members of LSUCUR, these are the questions of concern about the proposed Web site:.

- What does LSUCUR need to do on the Web site to get stakeholders to report their community service?
- Is there any interest among stakeholders in visiting to the proposed site?
- How can LSUCUR get stakeholders to return to the site?
- What would stakeholders like to see on the Web site?
- How would LSUCUR educate stakeholders about this site?

The second part of my study took place in the fall of 2009. After presenting LSUCUR with the findings of three focus groups, I then tested a prototype of the Web site that LSUCUR will launch on January 1, 2010 based on usability research. Simply speaking, usability can determine how easy the Web site is to navigate. The concept of usability has been studied for the past 50 years, mostly in the computer science field. Usability is a branch of ergonomics, the study of design for human use. LSUCUR wants a Web site that will attract stakeholders, and also be easy to use. University relations professionals realize the importance of a user friendly Web site, one in which stakeholders can easily navigate and interact.

LSUCUR also realizes that positioning oneself on the World Wide Web in a positive light is an important strategy in the field of public relations. When one designs a Web site, it is important that the site not only be attractive, but user friendly. A Web page can be the first place many people go to find out about a corporation, a non-profit organization, government agency or a university. One can easily form an opinion based on the appearance and usability of an entity's Web site.

In the case of Web site design, usability refers to the degree of ease with which the user can accomplish a desired task on the site. If a Web site is easy to use, a visitor is more likely to stay on the site and return to it. To determine the ease of use of the "LSU Serves the World" Web site, I intend to answer the following question: How easy to use is the "LSU Serves the World" Web site? This second part of the study is important because it provides universities with an insight into the ease of conducting usability tests during the design phase of their Web sites.

STUDY I

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

The uses and gratifications approach to mass communication recognizes that the audience is often quite “active” in choosing media. Rubin (1994) argued that audience activity-- the choices that audience members make to satisfy their needs-- is the core element of this concept. The uses and gratifications theory is concerned with how individuals use the media, and therefore it emphasizes the importance of the individual (Raake, & Bonds-Raake, 2008, p. 170).

According to Ruggiero (2000, p.13), “The uses and gratification theory fell out of favor with some mass communication scholars for several decades, but the advent of telecommunications technology may have revived it from dormancy.” The deregulation of the communications industry and digital technology provide media consumers with more exposure. Ruggiero noted, “As new technologies present consumers with more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis” (2000, p.3). Ruggiero also pointed out that the uses and gratification approach “has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communication medium; newspapers, radio, television, and now the Internet” (2000, p.27).

The Internet provides the consumer with the opportunity to interact. Interactivity strengthens the concept of active user because participants have control and can exchange roles in their discourse (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 15). Users can interact with others through social networking sites, chat rooms or by exchanging e-mail messages. Ha and James (1998) concluded that interactivity on the Internet has five important dimensions: (1) playfulness, which refers to the degree to which an interactive experience is entertaining; (2) choice, which deals with the amount of alternatives available to users in an interactive experience; (3) connectedness, which provides the feeling of being able to link to the outside world and to broaden one’s

experiences; (4) information collection; and (5) reciprocal communication (Ha & James, 1998, para.17-30). In 2002, Kiouisis provided scholars with an operational definition of “interactivity.”

Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to the ability of users to perceive the experience of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence. (p. 379)

Simply speaking, the interactive ability of the Internet provides opportunities for people to communicate with others at their convenience. The Web is always up and running and that allows people to “surf,” retrieve information, and reciprocate on their own time (Ruggiero, p.27). With e-mail and the Internet, one has the potential to store, duplicate or print graphics and text, or transfer them to an online Web page or e-mail address (Ruggiero, p.16).

Lull (1995), suggested that the study of how and why people use media, through uses and gratification research, may offer clues to understanding about exactly what needs are, where they originate, and how they are gratified. Some communication scholars view the Internet as “the ultimate in individualism” (Ruggiero, p. 20) while others “see the Web as the ultimate in community building...through which users can create relationships online that have never been possible through traditional media” (Ruggiero, p. 20).

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) examined audience uses of the Internet from a uses and gratifications perspective. Their study focused on the motives for Internet usage, how study participants used the Internet to meet their wants and needs. The researchers found “information seeking”, “entertainment”, and “convenience” to be the most salient reasons for using the Internet. “Convenience” included the ability to communicate with friends and family and to send

e-mail (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p, 166).

Communication research has also focused on ways to use the Internet to serve needs in the form of relationship building. Johnson (1997) authored the first study which sought to gather information about public relations practitioners' use of the Internet. Johnson's research had two purposes: to investigate technology and practitioner roles and to investigate technology and practitioners' ability to carry out two-way communication with publics (Johnson, 1997, p. 214). Johnson concluded that public relations professionals were moving forward in this new era of public relations. Johnson's research was followed by Kent and Taylor's (1998) scholarly article which provided a theory-based strategic framework to facilitate relationship building with publics through the World Wide Web. Kent and Taylor offered public relations professionals a new dialogic communication theory as the way to strategically use the World Wide Web to communicate with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 322). They suggested a "dialogic loop" which would allow publics to query organizations, and offer organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems (p. 326). Kent and Taylor also proposed that Web sites should include "useful" and "valuable" information to all publics (p. 328) so that the publics will visit the site again.

Sites should contain features that make them attractive for repeat visits such as updated information, changing issues, special forums, new commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions, and on-line "experts" to answer questions for interested visitors. Sites that contain limited/unchanging information, are no longer useful after one visit and do not encourage return visits. Sites that contain constantly updated and "valuable" information for public appear credible and suggest that an organization is responsible. (p. 329)

Kent and Taylor recognized the value of dialogic communication created by the strategic use of the Internet as a way for organizations to build relationships with publics. The “publics,” through Internet chat rooms and social networking sites, have also adapted dialogic communication in building “peer to peer” relationships. Online communities and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook allow users to talk, share and relate to one another.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) applied the uses and gratifications theory to explore two social networking sites, MySpace and Facebook. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke define social networking sites as “virtual places that cater to a specific population in which people of similar interest gather to communicate, share, and discuss ideas” (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p.169). These sites have a number of features that allow users to have dialogue with others. Users can post information, post photographs, write messages to their “friends.” These sites also offer “group” memberships, where those with similar interests can join.

Public relations and advertising professionals recognize the value of Internet “dialogue” over the “monologue” that traditional media offer. Hanlon and Hawkins (2008) challenged advertising and public relations professionals to successfully engage in “this dialogue across the great Internet divide” (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008, p.14) to better communicate with publics. “When you build a community of passionate advocates who share your beliefs, the dialogue becomes a natural evolution of your customer-relationship practices, inspiring trust, relevance and renewed energy around your brand” (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008, p. 14).

In the Raacke and Bonds-Raacke study, the researchers solicited college students to participate in a study on student Internet usage, with no mention of social networking sites.

Raacke and Bonds-Raacke chose college students as participants because both MySpace and Facebook are popular with that age group (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 170). The researchers gave the 116 participants two-part packets to complete. The first page contained only one question, “Do you have a MySpace or Facebook account?” Those students who checked “yes” proceeded to page 2 of the packet, where they answered questions about uses and gratifications. Those who checked “no” proceeded to page 5 of the packet where they answered general questions about why they didn’t have a MySpace or Facebook account. The questionnaire also included “failed uses and gratifications for not having a friend-networking site” (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 171).

Of those in the Raacke and Bonds-Raacke exploratory study, 101 or 87.1% had either a MySpace or Facebook account. Fifteen or 12.9% did not have either account. Regarding the users, the study found the following uses and gratifications for having MySpace or Facebook:

- To keep in touch with old friends (96.0%);
- To keep in touch with current friends (91.1%);
- To post/look at pictures (57.4%);
- To locate old friends (54.5%);
- To learn about events (33.7%);
- To post social functions (21.8%);
- To feel connected (19.8%);
- To share information about yourself (13.9%);
- For academic purposes (10.9%);
- For dating purposes (7.9%).

Regarding the non-users, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke found the two most popular failed

uses and gratifications responses were “I just have no desire to have an account” (73.3%), and “I am too busy” (46.7%) (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p.173). Most of the nonusers had heard of MySpace (86.7%) and Facebook (60.0%) but had never opened an account with either social networking site and did not feel pressured to get an account (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 172).

Raacke and Bonds-Raacke’s exploratory study concluded that social networking site users spend a lot of time on those sites and that “users must be meeting personal and social needs from these sites” (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 173). They use these sites to make new friends and keep up with old friends, to learn about events and to “feel connected” (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 174). Simply stated, users are going to these sites to gather and spread information. They are going to these sites to conduct a dialogue, and according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the social networking site dialogue is spreading among age groups.

PEW INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT

A 2009 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey concludes that the share of adult Internet users who have a profile on an online social network site has more than quadrupled since 2005. Pew defines social networks “as spaces on the internet where users can create a profile and connect that profile to others (individuals or entities) to create a personal network” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009, p. 1). The Pew tracking survey shows that 35% of adults use these Web sites, compared to just 8% in 2005. Younger adults are more likely than older adults to use social networks; teenagers are roughly twice as likely as adults to use these sites. According to the Pew Internet Project’s December 2008 Survey, here’s how social networking site usage breaks down according to adult ages:

- 77% of online adults between 18-24 have a social network profile;
- 57% of on online adults between 25-34 have a social network profile;
- 30% of online adults between 35-44 have a social network profile;
- 19% of online adults between 45-54 have a social network profile;
- 10% of online adults between 55-64 have a social network profile;
- 7% of online adults 65 and older have a social network profile.

The Pew survey finds that most adults use online social networks to connect and make plans with friends, make new friends, and organize with other people for events, issues or causes. Users also flirt with others, promote themselves or their work, and make new business contacts on these sites (Pew, 2009, p.2). Although the Pew survey looks promising for the adoption of social networking sites for uses and gratifications among adults, “At its core, use of online social networks is still a phenomenon of the young,” (Pew, 2009, p.1).

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

“Impression management signifies that people use communication deliberately and strategically to create desired impressions of themselves” (Johansson, 2007, p. 276). Sociologist Erving Goffman developed the concept in the mid-20th century. It is also called self-presentation, and it involves the deliberate control of information as a way to control perception (Sallot, 2002). Impression management theory proposes that organizations create a public impression about themselves to convey or express specific information they want others to know about them (Schlenker, 1980). This technique includes self-promotion and highlighting organizations’ roles and important accomplishments in their communities (George, 2000). Impression management theory has guided some research in mass communication, particularly in the field of public relations, “since impression management and public relations both largely involve the strategic control of

information to communicate particular, desired impressions to identified audiences” (Sallot, 2002, p. 153).

In studying corporate impression management strategies on the World Wide Web, Connolly-Ahern and Broadway (2007), examined the extent to which corporations practiced two-way communications with their publics on corporate Web pages (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007, p. 344). Researchers conducted a content analysis of the Web sites of 110 Fortune 500 companies, looking for the presence or absence of five impression management strategies: ingratiation, competence, intimidation, exemplification, and supplication. Their analysis showed that all corporate sites “exhibited some kind of competence strategy” (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007, p.345) and it was clear from their findings that “establishing a corporation’s competence is a critical function of a corporate Web site” (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007, p.345).

In regard to the practice of two-way communication, Connolly-Ahern and Broadway’s analysis also showed that 96% of corporate Web sites provided e-mail addresses for feedback and 75% offered an e-mail link. Less than half of the sites provided visitors with an opportunity to fill out an online profile. Connolly-Ahern and Broadway concluded that although corporations realized the importance of their Web sites as an impression management tool, they were not fully using the two-way capabilities of the Web.

Meyer, (2008a), evaluated the Internet home pages of 40 public higher education institutions. The researcher came up with five conclusions about the Web sites: each institution reviewed focused on students and displayed a lot of information about relevant services; the number and frequency of photos containing minority students indicated a commitment to minority students; the predominant use of home pages was for conducting institutional business; in many cases the home page design was not user-friendly; and institutional home pages need to increase the

interactivity that students and other stakeholders have with the institution. Meyer concluded that “the ‘virtual face’ of higher education needs to maximize its human qualities of responsiveness and caring” (Meyer, 2008a, p.156). Meyer contended that modifying home pages to make them easier for the first-time visitor to navigate would go a long way to improving the view that higher education can be “inconsiderate of the needs of others” (Meyer, 2008a, p.156).

Meyer (2008b) authored an additional study on the “virtual face” of institutions in which she researched 40 public university Web pages to determine the availability of online information of interest to legislators and parents. Meyer’s analysis showed that “higher education is not as open or transparent to outsiders as it might be” (Meyer, 2008b, p 185). She noted the following:

How higher education uses its web site to communicate with others outside the institution continues to send a message that is neither complimentary or, perhaps, accurate. But the implied message that the institution is not sharing important information is nevertheless there. (Meyer, 2008b, p. 185)

Kang and Norton (2006) analyzed university Web sites to determine how the institutions utilized the Web to accomplish public relations goals. They concluded that the sampled universities “were excellent in performing usability of Web sites with simplified design, minimal navigation menus, high navigation speed, and inclusion of site maps” (Kang & Norton, 2006, p.428). Kang and Norton noted, however, that “universities are not fully embracing the strength of their Web sites in their relational communication capabilities” (Kang & Norton, 2006, p.428). In other words, they were not doing a good job of “creating a synchronous dialogic loop with the public” (Kang & Norton, 2006, p.428).

Will and Callison’s 2006 analysis of college Web sites to determine how higher education used the Internet to communicate to key publics, including students, concluded that prospective donors were the most often-targeted public, followed by faculty and staff, and students. Will and

Callison concluded “that postsecondary institutions view their Web sites as a way to keep connected with their alumni” for fundraising purposes and “are more interested in obtaining money from alumni than attracting new students or providing service to current students, faculty and staff, parents and family, or visitors” (Will & Callison, 2006, p.182).

McAllister and Taylor (2007) analyzed community college Web sites as places for fostering dialogic relationships with key publics. They found to be missing certain interactive features needed to provide publics with two-way communication essential for dialogue. McAllister and Taylor recommended a better use of interactive strategies to develop relationships with key publics (McAllister & Taylor, 2007, p. 232).

The purpose of this study is to determine how a major land-grant university should design an interactive Web site that would feature the community service work of faculty and staff, students, and alumni, also referred to as stakeholders. After establishing the problem statement and reviewing the relevant literature, I have determined that I will pursue following three research questions through the use of focus groups:

RQ1: What uses and gratifications, if any, do social networking sites provide stakeholders?

RQ2: Does the university create the impression of “service” among stakeholders?

RQ3: What would motivate stakeholders to visit and/or participate in an interactive Web site on university service?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The LSUCUR staff wanted to develop a strategy that would not only provide stakeholders with a user-friendly Web site, but would also attract them and motivate them to participate. LSUCUR wanted to use focus groups to gather information that will help them determine if there is interest in such a site, what key stakeholders would like to see on the site, what would motivate the

stakeholders to participate in the site, and how to educate stakeholders about the site. Focus groups provide researchers with a strategy for understanding attitudes and behavior (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 128). Researchers use focus groups to gather qualitative data that will answer such questions as “how” and “why.” Public relations practitioners use focus groups as a tool for assessing the interest, desires and needs of their publics (Buddenbaum & Novak, 2001. p. 218). Because focus groups allow researchers to collect preliminary information about a topic, LSUCUR and I agreed that this research strategy will be the most effective way of determining participation and motivation among stakeholders.

As researcher, I was responsible for preparing the focus group materials, designing the research instrument, selecting a sample, determining the number of focus groups, finding a location, and moderating. I decided to have three focus groups: one combined of LSU alumni; one combined of LSU faculty and staff; and one combined of current LSU students. On January 5, 2009 I applied for an exemption from Institutional Oversight from the LSU Institutional Review board to conduct the focus group research and received the exemption number E4356 and expiration date of 1-5-2012.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Researchers choose focus group participants because they possess certain characteristics that indicate they may be able to provide information, ideas, or insight on the problem of interest to the researcher (Buddenbaum & Novak, p. 219). In the case of this project, I recruited a non-probability, purposive sample of participants to meet the requirement of my three focus groups. Focus group one consisted of LSU faculty and staff members. Focus group two consisted of students who attended LSU at the time of my research, the spring semester of 2009. Focus group three consisted of LSU alumni who had attended the university anywhere from the 1960’s to the 2000’s.

To get a sample for the faculty and staff focus group, I randomly selected names from the LSU Faculty Senate and LSU Staff Senate lists. I sent emails to a total of 10 people from the lists. I received three positive responses from the sample. I then emailed personal acquaintances on the faculty and staff to complete the focus group. I also solicited two African American faculty and staff members to provide group diversity. The acquaintances and the two African Americans, who were not acquaintances, agreed to attend. The faculty and staff focus group consisted of seven people, five women and two men, ranging in age from 27 to 61. LSUCUR did not give members of this focus group a cash payment for their participation.

To solicit members for the student group, I randomly selected 10 names from a list of student leaders of campus student organizations and solicited them through email. I received one positive response from the email. I then went to the LSU Student Union on Wednesday, March 4, 2009, the day LSU Student Government Association candidates announced for election. I solicited students from among those gathered in front of the Student Union, and was able to add five students to my focus group. I solicited another student at an off campus location. I followed up all solicitations with a reminder email, and all but one attended the student focus group, for a total of six. The group, comprised of four males and two females, ranged in age from 18 to 21. One of the male students is African American. LSUCUR paid the members of this focus group \$30 apiece for their participation.

I also solicited alumni focus group members through email. I retrieved some names from the Greater Baton Rouge Chapter of the LSU Alumni Association, and I also solicited acquaintances. My goal was to achieve a focus group comprised of alums from the 1960s to the 2000s. This focus group was comprised of four males and three females, ranging in age from 27 to 58. No African Americans were in this group. LSUCUR paid the members of this focus group \$50 apiece for their participation.

I held both the faculty and staff and student focus groups on Wednesday, March 11, 2009 at an on-campus location. I held the LSU alumni focus group on Friday, March 13, 2009 at the same on-campus location. I had each member of the focus groups sign consent forms and I also tape recorded, took notes, and videotaped the sessions for transcription. A member of the LSUCUR staff assisted in taking notes of the three sessions.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

My research instrument consisted of 10 questions (See Appendix A). As Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggest, I used the “funneling technique” to sequence my questions. In funneling, the moderator starts off with general questions and then moves to a specific topic (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p.133). The first four questions of my research instrument concerned the general use of Internet social networking sites. My fifth question asked focus group members to provide words they associate with LSU. I placed that question in the instrument to determine if any of the focus group participants would associate words such as “service” or “voluntarism” or “service learning” with LSU. The next five questions introduced the specific research topic, an interactive Web site that will feature volunteer work of alumni, faculty and staff, and students.

The flexibility of qualitative methods provide the researcher with the ability to ask follow-up questions and pursue areas of interest that come up during focus group sessions. In this case of this study, I, as moderator, followed the questionnaire closely, but allowed relevant discussion if focus members provided it. My goal, however, was to make sure that each focus group answered the same 10 questions on my questionnaire so that I could have a complete comparison among the groups.

RESULTS

I transcribed the focus group data and analyzed it, giving equal credence to all participants and input from all groups. I also included notes that I had taken during the focus group sessions. I analyzed each research instrument question, one at a time, by studying the transcripts and personal notes. I categorized and placed the responses to the instrument questions with each of the three research questions. I then provided an analysis of each research question, including comments from members of the three focus groups.

RQ1: WHAT USES AND GRATIFICATIONS, IF ANY, DO SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES PROVIDE STAKEHOLDERS?

“Facebook is so popular with college kids because it’s not a huge commitment. You can browse people without having a long-term relationship.” (Student)

First of all, I determined that all members of the three focus groups were aware of Internet social networking sites, and that all members of the student focus group have social network accounts. Some of the faculty and staff group members and some of the members of the alumni group have social network accounts. The social network site, Facebook, is by far the favorite social networking site among those focus group members who use these sites.

“It’s Facebook. It’s easy. We know how to navigate the social networking site.” (Student)

How often do they go to social networking sites? The answers varied among those stakeholders who use the sites. Some spend several hours a day on their social networking sites, while others check their sites sporadically. Some focus group members access their sites through their cellular phones, to be able to keep up “minute by minute” with postings to their social networking site.

Uses and gratifications research tells us that people are active in choosing media and Ha and James point to “connectedness” as an important dimension of Internet interactivity. For some focus group members, the ability to actively stay connected is important.

“It’s a good way to connect with old classmates. I’ve been able to connect with around the world.”(Alumnus)

Other focus group members found the notion of social networking sites unappealing and/or too time consuming. They had little to no desire to participate in Internet social networking sites.

“I...find the social networking thing very time consuming. And this notion, this ‘post’ thing...I don’t have time to post what I’m doing.” (Faculty member)

As Papacharissi and Rubin’s uses and gratifications research points out, people use the Internet to seek information, for entertainment, and for convenience. Members of all three focus groups interact on the Internet, but their uses and gratifications are individualized. They all have email accounts, but they do not all have social networking accounts. Those with social networking accounts access their accounts to fulfill the uses and gratifications that meet their needs.

**“I probably get on Facebook on my cell phone more than I do on my computer.”
(Student)**

As the Pew Internet & American Life Project survey spells out, adults use online social networks to connect and make plans with friends, make new friends, and organize with other people for events, issues or causes. Those focus group members who participate in online social networks use the sites as the Pew Project surmises. The students, however, are the most frequent participants in social networking. The faculty and staff, and alumni focus group members who have social network accounts choose not to access, sporadically access, or frequently access their

accounts.

“Everyday, quite a bit. Not during work, but at night quite a bit.” (Alumnus)

In conclusion, interactive social networking sites provide these focus group members who use them with the uses and gratifications that scholars have determined about the Internet to date: connectedness, convenience, entertainment, choice, playfulness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. The key, however, remains with the Internet user, who determines whether he wants to participate in social networking sites to fulfill these uses and gratifications. Some of the stakeholders in my research have chosen to do so frequently, others sporadically and others not at all.

RQ2: DOES THE UNIVERSITY CREATE THE IMPRESSION OF “SERVICE”
AMONG STAKEHOLDERS?

“You wouldn’t go to LSU if you were thinking about volunteering.” (Alumnus)

Louisiana State University, as a land-grant institution, has an obligation to community service, but do its stakeholders know this? The literature on impression management theory tells us that people use communication to deliberately create desired impressions of themselves. In LSU’s case, has the university created a public impression that conveys that it is a university of service and community engagement? Has LSU promoted and highlighted the roles it plays in important community accomplishments? When stakeholders think of LSU, do they think of service?

According to Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006), relationships between communities and their universities, town-gown relationships as they’re called, have historically been strained. Many early universities were developed for educating members of the ministry. Some of those universities felt that the community was morally corrupt and “protected” their students from the

surrounding neighborhood.

When Congress passed the 1862 Morrill Act, which established land-grant colleges, it gave those colleges the task of providing public service in return for federal aid. However as Bruning, McGrew and Cooper note:

Instead of developing a mutually beneficial relationship, however, many universities viewed the community as a “client” and focused their efforts on fulfilling contractual responsibilities so as to ensure the flow of federal dollars. Over the time, many universities began viewing the towns in which they were located as obligations rather than relational partners. (Bruning, McGrew & Cooper p. 126).

Bruning, McGrew and Cooper found, that in the 1990’s, universities began to recognize the problems of disconnectedness between institutions and communities. By the beginning of the 21st century, The Kellogg Commission on the Future of Public and Land-grant Universities recommended that “community engagement” become a central part of universities’ missions. As a result, some universities took steps to strengthen town-gown relationships and engage the community.

To determine if LSU has done the job of positioning itself as a university of service and engagement, I included in my research instrument a question in which I asked stakeholders to provide words they associated with LSU. I built this question into the research instrument to determine if focus group members would suggest any word connected with “voluntarism” or “community service” in association with LSU. No members of the three focus groups suggested either of these words when I asked them to associate words with LSU. The two words that all three groups mentioned were “tradition” and “history.” Members of two groups mentioned “the South” or “Southern.” Members of two groups also mentioned the word, “flagship.” The other

words mentioned in no particular order are: diverse, pride, spirit, culture, innovative, tigers, football, education, baseball, tailgating, national championships, “Mike”, terracotta tile roofs, no parking, roots, vibrant atmosphere, something for everyone, broke, political, potential, struggling. I conclude that, based on the focus group responses, LSU had not successfully conveyed the “service” or “community engagement” association of the university to its stakeholders.

RQ3: WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE STAKEHOLDERS TO VISIT
AND/OR PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERACTIVE WEB SITE ON
UNIVERSITY SERVICE?

To answer RQ3, I first introduced information on the sesquicentennial celebration in 2010, and then explained to focus group members that LSU was considering the establishment of a Web site that would feature volunteer work of LSU alumni, faculty and staff, and students. I then followed up with five questions designed to solicit comments on “what would” and “how to” motivate stakeholders to visit and/or participate in the proposed Web site. The questions were: What would interest you in participating in Web site? What kinds of things would you like to see and reach on the Web site? What would motivate you to participate in a volunteer related Web site? What would motivate you to come back to the Web site? What do you think is the best way to let people know about a Web site like this?

Chung and Yoo’s 2008 study of audience motivations for using Internet interactive features of online newspapers found that survey respondents chose information seeking/surveillance, socialization, and entertainment as their three most important motivators. According to uses and gratifications research, individual social and psychological characteristics influence people’s needs and desires, which, in turn affect their motives to communicate. In the

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) study of audience uses of the Internet from a uses and gratifications perspective, they identified five motives for using the Internet: interpersonal utility, passing time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. According to the Papacharissi and Rubin study, “convenience” included the ability to interactively communicate with friends and family.

Using uses and gratifications research as my guide, I designed the five questions listed above to determine if focus group members would find the proposed LSU Web site useful and gratifying to them. My first question involved finding out if focus group members were interested in participating in the proposed Web site. Some focus group members were not interested.

“It’s a great idea, but it doesn’t draw people in. There’s not a lot of hype around it. There’s something you’d have to do. I guess I’m being a pessimist.” (Alumnus)

Other focus group members expressed concerns that the proposed Web site would not be of interest to them unless it provided some benefit to them. Some members suggested that the Web site should include volunteer recruitment information so that anyone looking to volunteer could go to this site to find volunteer opportunities.

“It would be a great resource to find what people are doing and see how maybe you could give back or be involved.” (Alumnus)

“I stay very active in the community in organizations and it would be a good way to recruit people.” (Faculty member)

I then asked focus group members what they would be interested in seeing and reading on the proposed Web site. This question drew a variety of answers and some concerns as to whether a site on volunteer efforts would draw stakeholders. Focus group members suggested that the proposed Web site should be easy to use, interactive, and similar to Facebook. To quote

one focus group member, if it is a Facebook type Web site:

“I think you’ll get a lot more people willing to participate, I think you’ll build energy with the site and of course that means you have to let it morph into its own thing.”

(Student)

Some members also suggested that the Web site be “engaging” to stakeholders, or they may not seek it out because according to a focus group member, “They wouldn’t go to [an] LSU [Web site] to find out about volunteer work, it just doesn’t fit.” Most members agreed that they would be interested in a site that is both easy and fun to read and easy to interact with; something that provides information about their university and friends.

The focus groups then provided a variety of motivational tools that would encourage them to visit and/or participate in the proposed Web site. One tool would be to showcase LSU student athletes, celebrities, or well known LSU alumni on the Web site who are doing volunteer work.

“I know when students see student athletes volunteering, if they can go and volunteer right alongside of them, any type of draw like that.” (Student)

A student focus group member suggested that LSU should provide the initial motivation for voluntarism, and provide information on volunteer opportunities.

“If there was a push for students to want to volunteer, then that Web site would certainly be one of the first places to go to find out what’s going on when and how to participate.”(Student)

A member of the faculty and staff focus group also suggested that information on volunteer opportunities would motivate her to visit and/or participate in the site.

“I think people would like to be more involved, but they don’t know how...So, if you had something, “Did you know this is happening, you can get involved, click on this link,”

and people would say, yeah, I'd be willing to give some hours to that.” (Faculty member)

I then asked focus group members what would motivate them to revisit the proposed Web site. Three themes emerged from this research question. First of all, focus group members agreed the Web site needs be an “attention getter,” but not “overwhelming.” To quote one student focus group member, “Being overwhelmed is quite possibly death to any Web site.” Focus group members’ comments patterned Kent and Taylor’s dialogic communications theory which suggests that Web sites should contain features that make them attractive for repeat visits. A student focus group member suggested that the site be “regularly updated.” A member of the faculty and staff focus group suggested that the Web site “flash” the number of volunteer hours logged on the site during the course of the sesquicentennial year.

“It would be a good attention getter and also encourage people to put their hours on the Web site.” (Staff member)

Secondly, focus group members suggested an “email push” or “email blast” from the Web site that would alert them to information changes on the site. Electronic mail serves as a perfect tool, not only to disseminate information, but to keep stakeholders engaged and interested. As an example, after the University of California at Los Angeles conducted a \$3 billion dollar fund raising campaign in 2005, the alumni marketing staff found that the best way to keep alumni engaged and interested in the university was through constant communication via e-mail (Strout, 2006).

Thirdly, focus group members, particularly student members, said they would be motivated to return to the Web site if it was on Facebook. According to Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, this tech-savvy generation spends more time using online communication, and is more comfortable doing so as compared to older generations (Raacke, Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Interactive Web sites facilitate communication between humans, and Web sites that excel at

interactivity bring people together. One student member sums up their sentiments about the use of Facebook to connect stakeholders to the proposed Web site:

“Through Facebook they can access the Web site easily. You can put events on Facebook for the Web site. You can also create a fan page for the volunteer stuff. So I think it all goes back to Facebook, really and truly.” (Student)

DISCUSSION

How does Louisiana State University design a Web site that will both interest and motivate stakeholders to visit and/or participate in the site? To quote one focus group member, “It’s a tough sell.” Alumni focus group members pointed out that LSU did not require volunteer or community service when they were students at the University. “They didn’t make a big deal out of it, volunteering in college,” noted a 28 year-old LSU alumnus. On a positive note, some members of the alumni focus group said the Web site could be a catalyst to get people to volunteer. They suggested that during the first year of the Web site, the University should highlight a service area each month, and encourage people to do volunteer work in that area during that month. The alumni focus group also suggested that the proposed Web site feature LSU Alumni Association volunteer efforts among the chapters across the country. They expressed interest in finding out what Alumni chapters are doing for community service.

A member of the faculty and staff focus group pointed out that a lot of volunteers do not want publicity. “A lot of people who do volunteer work don’t want to trumpet it because it seems self-serving,” the faculty member stated. Another faculty member suggested asking friends and co-workers about others who do volunteer work to generate some information for the proposed Web site. A third faculty member agreed that the University would have to solicit information about volunteer efforts because people may not be forthcoming on their own. The faculty and staff focus group also mentioned concerns about older volunteers who may not be

adept with computers. “The people who have time to volunteer are not going to be that well versed in using the Web site,” said a faculty focus group member.

The student focus group asked a very simple question about the proposed Web site. “What can this Web site do for me?” This group, so focused on the Facebook design, expressed a desire for a Web site with features that mimic their favorite social networking site. They want to be able to keep track of what other people are doing via the Web site; they want to be able to establish Web site “friends,” and they want personalized emails. They see the proposed Web site as an opportunity to “network” and “interact” with LSU alumni who have the connections they need for their futures. The idea of “voluntarism” didn’t overly appeal to the student focus group, but they did express interest in volunteering if they could do so with high profile alums, celebrities, and faculty members. The student group suggested that the proposed Web site use more pictures than words. They did, however, suggest that the Web site target the volunteer organizations already on campus and get those organizations to “network” with students via the site. What can this Web site do for students? It can provide them with volunteer and networking opportunities that will help them land jobs in the future.

Will student stakeholders and others find the proposed Web site a place to *easily* find volunteer and networking information and opportunities? The next step in this study is to determine whether stakeholders will find the proposed Web site easy to use. In study II, I will define Web site usability and describe the research I conducted to determine the ease of use of the proposed “LSU Serves the World” Web site. Scholarly research suggests that stakeholders form opinions on an entity based on the appearance and usability of its Web site. I conducted usability tests on the prototype site with a convenience sample of stakeholders to determine ease of use.

STUDY II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of usability has been heavily examined for the past 50 years, mostly in the computer science area. Usability is a branch of ergonomics, the study of design for human use. Zimmerman and Muraski define usability as “how well the intended users can interact with a technology to carry out the assigned activity” (Zimmerman & Muraski, 1995). Usability has become a defining standard for judging computer software, because software can be difficult for consumers to use. Software producers spend millions of dollars testing software usability to reduce errors and improve user efficiency (Hallahan, 2001). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defines usability as the extent in which a product can be used by specific users to achieve specific goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use (ISO 9241-11, 1998). ISO is the world’s largest developer and publisher of international stands for products and services. Its standards ensure such desirable characteristics as quality, environmental friendliness, safety, and reliability (About ISO, 2009).

In the case of Web site design, usability refers to the degree of ease with which the user can accomplish a desired task on that site. Jakob Nielsen, one of the earliest and best-known advocates of usability research, argues that usability refers to how well users can achieve some desired goal. He advocates five criteria for usability: 1) easy to learn, 2) efficient to use, 3) easy to remember, 4) produce a minimum of errors, and 5) be subjectively pleasing to the user (Nielsen, 1993). Nielsen hosts a Web site, www.useit.com, in which he provides information on why Web site usability and usability testing are important. Nielsen notes:

On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people **leave**. If the homepage fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people **leave**. If users get lost on a website, they **leave**.

If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they **leave**. Note a pattern here? There's no such thing as a user reading a website manual or otherwise spending much time trying to figure out an interface. There are plenty of other websites available; leaving is the first line of defense when users encounter a difficulty. (Nielsen, 2009)

The United States government, on its Web site, www.usability.gov, has adopted Nielsen's five measurements for usability. This Web site, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides detailed guidance on Web site design for usability, including step-by-step guides on how to go from the initial concept to final Web site deployment. The Web site provides an electronic format for over 40 design guidelines, which have "been widely used by government agencies and the private sector, implemented in academic curriculum" (U.S. Department, 2009). The government Web site includes a section on usability testing, defining usability as "how well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process" (U.S. Department, 2009). The site suggests the use of an iterative approach to testing. Simply speaking, the designer should test the Web site design, get results, and test the Web site again.

While it is common for commercial Web site designers to perform usability tests, Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, and Kurpius (2008) found no evidence of such testing for non-commercial sites such as news organizations, governments or non-profits. Commercial Web sites, in the business of sales, use usability testing as a way to make sure potential customers can navigate their sites and purchase items. Commercial organizations spend thousands of dollars on usability consultants and services to test their Web sites (Trager, 2000). News organizations, governments, non-profits, and universities are not in the sales business, per se, and in many cases do not have the budgets to hire usability consultants to help with site designs. However, as I

learned from the literature on usability testing, such testing can in fact be an inexpensive and easy way to test a Web site prototype if one follows the approaches found on the Nielsen Web site, www.useit.com, and the governmental Web site, www.usability.gov. I will discuss these approaches in the methods section of this paper.

Coleman et al. used usability testing to determine whether a user friendly Web site would encourage citizens' attitudes toward engagement in civic life. Researchers created an experimental Web site on the topic of the state budget, and tested it to assure usability. They found that the site designed to conform to users' wants and needs in content, navigation, and appearance did foster positive attitudes toward civic engagement. Participants who saw the usable site were significantly more likely to have positive attitudes toward civic engagement than those who saw a site that was not designed for usability. Researchers found that usability testing "can result in a website that users find more appealing and useful and that they say they would visit again" (Coleman, et al., p. 197). Coleman et al. encouraged "online professionals to learn the simple techniques of usability testing that their commercial counterparts have long known and profitably employed" (Coleman, et al., p. 196).

In the case of the "LSU Serves the World" Web site, one could argue that the university is attempting to foster positive attitudes about voluntarism. LSU is not attempting to sell products on the site, like many commercial Web sites do; the university is simply trying to provide a site for its stakeholders to learn about volunteer opportunities and efforts, and to affect positive attitudes. As a land-grant university, LSU has a responsibility to be "engaged" with its community (Association, 2001, Executive Summaries section, para. 24-28). Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006) noted that most universities "engage" their communities by increasing student access to community through student teaching, internships, and volunteer opportunities. LSUCUR considers students as stakeholders in the "LSU Serves the World" Web site. LSUCUR

contends that an “easy to use” Web site that is efficient, effective, and satisfactory to students will promote a positive attitude toward voluntarism. Positive attitudes will foster positive moves toward community “engagement.”

Public relations divisions at universities like LSU often rely on campus editors and graphic designers to construct Web sites. Powell (2009) argues that it has become crucial for university public relations specialists to be centrally involved in Web design. Powell notes that the first wave of university Web sites “was primarily a migration of the catalog—a dry, straightforward document detailing policies and programs” (Powell, 2009, p. A37). He contends that many of today’s campus Web sites are still flat and formal, and that designers and university public relations practitioners are still trying to figure out how to provide Web sites that will satisfy visitors. Powell notes:

We are all learning, making it up as we go, borrowing from sites we like, tailoring solutions to our particular circumstances, testing new ideas. It’s common sense to consult individual departments on the campus for guidance on their sections of the site. But that process has its limits. If those of us in marketing and public relations are still trying to figure out the Web, why would we expect someone whose main expertise is teaching mathematics, or overseeing residential life, to have the answers? (p.A37)

Powell’s arguments speak to the heart of usability testing. If one can easily test a Web site prototype on potential stakeholders, which is what usability testing encompasses, one does not have guess about the site’s ease of use. In the case of the “LSU Serves the World” Web site, LSUCUR, the public relations arm of the university, realizes usability testing is valuable. By conducting usability tests, I expect to find an answer to my question of whether the prototype Web site is easy to use.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Usability testing commonly consists of identifying the targeted visitors for a Web site, identifying tasks the designers want the targeted visitors to complete, and systematically observing the users while they complete the tasks (McGovern, 2005). One of the main reasons for including users in the design process is to understand their needs and goals for using the site. In usability studies, one can accomplish this by testing users at each stage of the site production process (Nielsen, 2000). Nielsen contends that many people believe in user testing, but don't use it frequently because of the inability "to fire off a quick, small test when faced with a design decision" (Nielsen, 2003). Nielsen says usability testing can be simplified by using these three rules: 1) get representative **users**, 2) ask them to perform **tasks** with the design and 3) **shut up** and let the users do the talking (Nielsen, 2003).

The users should be the stakeholders in the Web site. In the case of the "LSU Serves the World" site, the stakeholders are students, faculty and staff, and alumni. The tasks that users perform should provide insight into the ease of navigation of the Web site. The usability test administrator should allow the user to talk aloud as he or she completes the tasks, while the administrator jots down comments. Once the user completes the tasks, the administrator can interview the user about the site, to gather qualitative information about the user's overall impressions, including ease of use.

The governmental Web site, www.usability.gov, recommends testing a small number of users (approximately six) to identify problems with navigation and overall design issues. Nielsen recommends up to five. He contends a usability study with five users will determine 85% of the usability problems with a Web site. If the first usability test shows the Web site has navigational problems, Nielsen recommends another usability test involving five more

participants “to discover most of the remaining 15% of the original usability problems that were not found in the first test” (Nielsen, 2000). The government site also recommends testing the site again with a small group of participants if the initial test results in a number of navigational problems.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

For this study, I recruited a convenience sample of users from the identified stakeholder groups. I recruited two LSU staff members, two LSU students, and two LSU alumni. I chose six users because I wanted two representatives from each stakeholder group and six is an acceptable number for usability testing.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Data for the usability study were collected on November 3-5, 2009. I received Institutional Review Board approval for the study before gathering data and had participants sign consent forms. I tested each participant individually at times and locations convenient to them. One staff member and two student participants chose on-campus locations. A second staff member and two alumni participants chose off-campus locations. According to www.usability.gov, testers can use either laboratory or remote usability testing because they both elicit similar results. Remote testing provides the opportunity for participants to take a test in their home or office and is convenient because it requires no travel to a test facility.

The usability test consisted of five parts and was completed in approximately 30 minutes. The first was a pre-test background questionnaire that consisted of six close-ended questions (see Appendix B). The pre-test was used to gather baseline data about the participants. Data collected in this section included demographic questions involving age, gender, Internet use, computer ownership, and computer comfort level. Two of the participants were male; four were female. They ranged in age from 20 to 59. All six participants owned computers. Two of the

participants spent between one and two hours a day on the Internet, while four spent three to five hours on the Internet each day. Four of the participants were “comfortable” using computers, while two were “very comfortable” using computers.

The second part of the usability test was an observation period in which I placed the user in front of a computer, and asked him or her to spend a minute exploring the prototype Web site on display. I made observations and took notes while the participant freely explored the site.

Participants completed five assigned tasks on the prototype site for the third part of the study. I chose the tasks based on conversations with LSUCUR and what was available to test on the prototype site (see Figure 1).

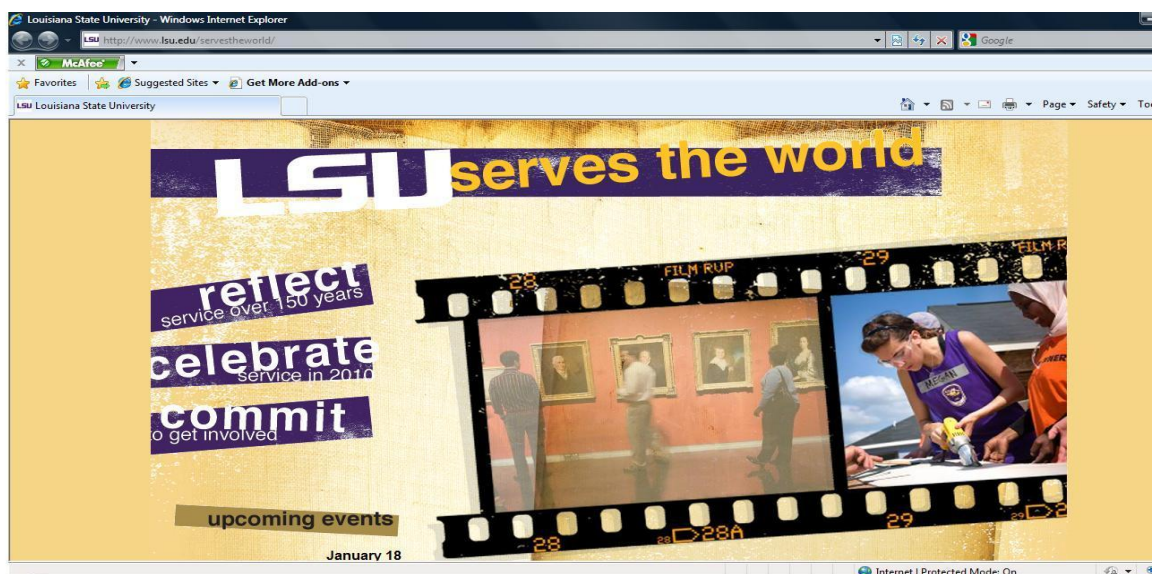


Figure 1: Prototype of LSU Serves the World Web Site

The prototype site consisted of a homepage, with the following links: a “reflect” link that contains stories about stakeholder service work, a “commit” link that allows users to fill out a “commitment to service” form, a “celebrate” link that allows users to read service stories posted by stakeholders, and a “share your service stories” link that provides a form for users to fill out if

they want their service work posted the site.

Since the prototype site provided links for users to interact with it, I chose two tasks that would require users to locate those Web pages. I also chose tasks that required users to find information on the prototype site. I read each task aloud and asked the participant to talk out loud while he or she completed the task. The five tasks included the following:

- Task #1--Find a short online article about a service project performed by LSU students.
- Task #2--Find the online form that provides a way for you to sign up for service hours.
- Task #3--Find the online form that allows you to interact with the Web site by providing information about your volunteer work.
- Task #4--Find information on what “LSU Serves the World” means.
- Task #5--Find a link that will take you to the “LSU Flagship” homepage.

Data collected in this section included participants’ verbal comments about the tasks, and observations of their interactions with the site.

The fourth part of the study was a post-test questionnaire composed of close-ended questions (See Appendix C). The post-test was designed to measure overall impressions of the site. The participant was asked to complete a series of Likert scale questions about the navigation, overall impressions and ease of use of the site.

The fifth part of the study involved a short interview with participants in which I asked them to express their impressions of the prototype Web site and make suggestions. I was able to write down a number of comments from the participants.

RESULTS

In this section, I provide results from the usability test tasks, results from the post-test questionnaire, and comments from interviews at the conclusion of the test. The results bode well for LSUCUR's "LSU Serves the World" prototype site.

Task #1-- Find a short online article about a service project performed by LSU students.

Three of the six participants found task #1 of the usability test "easy," and were able to quickly complete the task. Three participants found task #1 more difficult. One participant said the link "was not very clear" and another participant said "I was a little confused."

Task #2—Find the online form that provides a way for you to sign up for service hours.

Four of the six participants found task #2 of the usability test "easy." The two other participants did not think the task was easy. One found it "not very clear in my opinion," and the other also expressed that he did not think the site navigation was clear.

Task #3—Find the online form that allows you to interact with the Web site by providing information about your volunteer work.

Five of the six participants found task #3 "easy." The participant who did not find the task easy commented that it was "a bit trickier" than previous tasks for him.

Task #4—Find information on what "LSU Serves the World" means.

Three of the six participants found task #4 "easy." The three participants who did not easily complete the task found that when they clicked on the "LSU Serves the World" title on the homepage, it did not provide information. "When I click on the title, the information should be there," commented one participant. To quote another participant, "I'm struggling with this one."

A third participant commented “When it says, ‘LSU Serves the World’ I clicked on the title. If you’re going to have that up there, then you should be able to click on that to say what it means.”

Task # 5—Find a link that will take you to the “LSU Flagship” homepage.

Three of the six participants found task #5 “easy.” The three participants who did not easily complete the task did not realize they could simply click on the LSU icon to take them to the LSU Flagship homepage. One participant said, “I don’t know, I think I’ve clicked on everything on the Web page. There it is! I found it! That was kind of hidden.” To quote another participant, “I don’t even know what the LSU flagship is. I’m really just stabbing around now. That’s kind of hard to find.”

After the participants completed their tasks, I then instructed them to fill out an eight question post-test Likert Scale questionnaire (See Appendix C). A Likert Scale, which is the most commonly used scale in mass media research, provides a good format for assessing participant opinions. When responding to a Likert questionnaire item, respondents specify their level of agreement to a statement. Because my research question dealt with the “ease of use” of the prototype Web site, I structured six of my close-ended questions (questions 2-7) to gauge attitudes about this construct (See Table 1).

Table 1: Attitudes Toward Web Site

Statement	Mean
1. I think that I would like to use this Web site frequently.	2.83
2. I thought the Web site was easy to use.	3.17
3. I would imagine that most people would learn to use this Web site quickly.	3.67
4. I found the Web site very cumbersome to use.	2.67
5. I felt very confident using the Web site.	3.67
6. I found the Web site to be unnecessarily complex.	2.67
7. I think I would need the support of a technical person to use this Web site.	1.33
8. I thought there was too much inconsistency in this Web site.	2.67

Based on a 5 point Likert Scale where 5 = “strongly agree” and 1 = “strongly disagree”

On a six item index on “ease of use,” my six subjects rated “ease of use” a 3.6 on a scale of 1-5. This average confirms that the “LSU Serves the World” prototype site, though not perfect, is easy to use. The participants in my study, however, did not find the Web site to be exceptionally interesting. On a single item index on “interest,” which is question one in Table 1, my subjects rated “interest” a 2.83 on a scale of 1-5.

The participants provided interesting analysis in the final segment of my usability testing, the post-test interview. As for the aesthetic value, most participants liked the graphics on the homepage and subsequent pages. They liked the layout and the use of colors. The following are some comments:

“I think it’s a good site. The mission statement on the front is kind of a good thing.”

(Student)

“I like the graphics. I think it’s user-friendly. It’s up to date.” (Alumnus)

“I love the background, the color, the ways it’s laid out.”(Staff member)

Some of the participants commented about what they considered to be a lack of a variety of pictures, and the lack of the ability to post pictures and videos to the prototype site. The following are some comments:

“I like to see a picture, and if the picture catches my interest, I’ll stay on it.” (Alumnus)

“Submitting pictures is hard, but college kids know how to do it.” (Student)

“The site needs You Tube and videos added.” (Alumnus)

Study participants also commented that the site lacked specific information on how to find out about volunteer opportunities. They suggested that the site include a list of volunteer opportunities as well as links to volunteer agencies. They also wanted a link on the Web site where they could sign up for specific volunteer projects.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for LSUCUR, the participants expressed concern that the Web site did not fully explain what “LSU Serves the World” means. One participant expressed that the site did not explain how LSU was serving the world, and wondered why the university had chosen such a title for the Web site. Another participant said the Web site needed more information on why LSU chose this project.

DISCUSSION

The good news about the usability test results in this study is that most participants found the “LSU Serves the World” prototype site easy to use. Most of the participants were able to effectively and efficiently navigate the site to their satisfaction. The two student users, who were the two who indicated they were “very comfortable” with computers on the pre-test, found the Web site the easiest to use. The four staff member and alumni participants, all of whom indicated they were “comfortable” with computers on the pre-test, found the Web site easy to use but expressed some concerns about the design in the post-test interview. Those stakeholders, whose comfort levels with computers are not strong as student stakeholders, suggested that Web site designers to use simplistic icons, larger type, and more pictures and videos.

These test results also show that a university can easily and inexpensively accomplish this type of testing during Web site construction. A public relations professional, working for a university, could easily draw from a pool of stakeholders on and off-campus to test prototype sites in this manner. All it takes is a computer, up to six volunteers, a Web site prototype, and about an hour of one’s time for each usability test. If the first round of usability tests shows problems with the prototype, university Web designers can make improvements and public relations professionals can test the site again and again until it is “usable.”

CONCLUSION

The purpose of my two-part study was to follow the creation of Web site from an original idea to its design, and then test the design for usability. I followed two well-known theories of mass communication, uses and gratifications and impression management, to determine what would interest stakeholders in a proposed Web site; I then conducted usability testing on a Web site prototype to determine the site's ease of use.

Study I provided me with a wealth of information and knowledge about the creation and design of Web sites, and how people interact with such sites. I was able to gather information about the importance of Ha and James' five dimensions of Internet interactivity from the three focus groups in this study. Focus group members pointed out desires for playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication in Web site design. LSUCUR was able to incorporate some of these dimensions in the prototype site that I tested in Study II.

The results of Study I also provided some interesting insight on stakeholders' views about LSU and community engagement. According to my research results, LSU, as a land-grant university, has embraced the mission of community engagement and community service, but has not done a good job of presenting this mission to its stakeholders. There was a "disconnect" among focus group members when I presented them with the idea of a proposed Web site designed to feature volunteer work of faculty and staff, students, and alumni. Basing my research instrument on the uses and gratifications theory of mass communication, I found few "uses" of interest, unless the Web site provided some benefit to stakeholders. Benefits included listings of volunteer and networking opportunities on the Web site.

Impression management theory also guided me in this study. The data show that LSU has not created the impression of being a university of service to its stakeholders. Meyer's 2008 study of universities and their Web sites determined that higher education needs to maximize its human qualities of responsiveness and caring. The data in this study indicate that LSU has not done the work needed to position itself as a university that cares.

If LSUCUR wants to establish a Web site that will feature volunteer work of LSU faculty and staff, students, and alumni, it will first of all, have to design a social networking site, similar to Facebook. LSUCUR could, in fact, launch a site on Facebook. The site will need to be easy to use, attractive, with plenty of pictures. It will need continuous updating and maintenance. The site will need to be "interactive" so that stakeholders can network with "friends" and can post volunteer work. It will need to send regular email blasts to get stakeholders to return to the site.

The proposed site should also serve as a resource and recruitment tool for volunteer opportunities. Campus service organizations as well as community volunteer organizations should be included on the site, with links to homepages. The site will need to establish some type of "LSU 150 kick-off" volunteer effort to spur enthusiasm among stakeholders. It will need to feature high profile stakeholders who are either planning to or are already participating in volunteer opportunities. LSUCUR will have to generate momentum to interest and motivate stakeholders. As reported in the findings section of the data analysis, focus group members listed a number of ways to educate stakeholders about the Web site, including a "150 day countdown" until the site's premiere.

Because the terms "voluntarism" or "community service" were not listed as words that focus group members associated with LSU, LSUCUR will have to provide some kind of "hook" to motivate stakeholders to visit a Web site on voluntarism. Since all three focus groups

associated the words, “history” and “tradition” with LSU, perhaps LSUCUR could use those words to generate a “new” tradition of voluntarism to coincide with the “historical” sesquicentennial celebration.

As Powell (2009) notes, many of today’s campus Web sites are flat and formal, and public relations practitioners are still trying to figure out how to provide Web sites that will satisfy visitors. In Meyer’s 2008 evaluation of 40 higher education Internet home pages, she found that in many cases the home page design was not user-friendly, and that institutional home pages needed to increase the interactivity that students and other stakeholders have with the institution. Meyer contended that modifying home pages to make them easier for the first-time visitor to navigate would go a long way to improving the view that higher education can be “inconsiderate of the needs of others” (Meyer, 2008, p. 156).

With Powell and Meyer in mind, I conducted the second part of my study, to determine if the “LSU Serves the World” prototype Web site was easy both easy to navigate and satisfactory to visitors. The good news here is that participants in the usability tests generally found the prototype site easy to use. They were able to complete the tasks, and for the most part, were satisfied with the usability of the site. The two student users found the Web site easiest to use, followed equally by staff members and alumni. As Nielsen (2009) points out, usability is a “necessary condition for survival,” on the World Wide Web, and in the case of the prototype Web site LSUCUR has provided its stakeholders with a usable site.

But, the question arises...if one designs a usable Web site, will visitors necessarily find it interesting? My second study did not specifically test for user “interest” in the “LSU Serves the World” Web site, although I was able to gather some insight from the post-test questionnaire and interview. As I reported in the Results section, on a single item index on “interest,” my subjects rated “interest” a 2.83 on a scale of 1-5. The two alumni participants expressed the least amount

of interest in the site, followed equally by the staff members and students.

The participants in Study II pointed out a lack of information about volunteer opportunities on the Web site prototype. They suggested that the site include a list of volunteer opportunities as well as links to volunteer agencies. They also wanted a link on the Web site where they could sign up for specific volunteer projects. The participants in Study I specifically mentioned an interest in the proposed site if it would include volunteer opportunities. They suggested that during the first year of the Web site, the university should highlight a service area each month, and encourage people to do volunteer work in that area during that month.

One can conclude that the way to garner interest in the Web site would be to provide stakeholders with an interactive way to sign up and participate in a host of volunteer activities. In other words, make it easy for stakeholders to find out about and be a part of community service projects. Since Study II provided participants with only a prototype of the “LSU Serves the World” Web site, it is unfair to conclude that the final site will not include an interactive feature that promotes voluntarism. From a public relations standpoint, a usable site that provides interesting information about volunteer opportunities should serve the university well.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although these studies are original and compelling in many ways, they have limitations that can nonetheless guide researchers in the study of Web site usability, uses and gratifications and impression management theories. Study I used a non-probability purposive sample of LSU faculty and staff, students, and alumni and is not generalizable. The three focus groups comprised a small sample of 21 people, compared of the thousands of stakeholders who make up the faculty and staff, students, and alumni. I designed this research method, however, to provide LSUCUR with preliminary information that could help them determine how to proceed with a proposed Web site. The three focus groups did provide insight and information related to the

problem of interest.

In Study II, I followed recommendations from www.usability.gov and Nielsen for Web site usability testing. Those sources recommend no more than six participants per test. Study II used a convenience sample of six stakeholders, and is not generalizable. The participants comprised a small sample, two from the student group, two from the faculty and staff group, and two from the alumni group.

As for Study II, because this research was limited to testing a Web site for “usability,” and not for “interest,” perhaps future researchers could find a way to test for both in the same manner. Perhaps the test “tasks” could include an exercise in which the participant searches for and comments on what he considers to be the most “interesting” pages on the Web site. The participant could also locate what he considers to be the most interesting graphics, pictures, or words. This type of information could help the public relations professional when consulting with Web designers. In the case of the “LSU Serves the World” Web site, testing the site for “interest” could provide solutions to some of the questions my study participants had about the site’s significance and meaning.

For researchers interested in university relations and Web site use, these studies provide a microscopic look at one land-grant university’s idea of establishing and testing a Web site designed to highlight community service. This research points out first how to “focus” on the concept of a site, and then how to test its “ease of use” before launching. A university, with thousands of visitors to its site, should provide a friendly, informative, and usable stop along the information superhighway. Web site visitors form attitudes from their initial visit to a site, and it is the job of the university public relations professional to ensure a visit will foster positive attitudes.

By conducting usability testing throughout the construction of a Web site, university

public relations professionals could ensure that a Web site is considerate of the many stakeholders who visit the site. Test results from Study II show that a university can easily and inexpensively accomplish usability testing during Web site construction. All it takes is a computer, up to six volunteers, a Web site prototype, and a list of tasks.

While public relations professionals test for usability, they can also gather information in a post-test interview that can provide them with important qualitative information concerning “interest” in the site. As I pointed out in Study I, I found a “disconnect” between the university and stakeholders on the issue of “community service,” despite the fact that as a land-grant university, service is one mission of the university. Interviewing usability participants at the end of the test can provide information to help make sites more interesting.

In the case of universities and community service, communications scholars can advance this research by determining how to better connect universities, community service, and stakeholders. Perhaps a Web site that promotes “service” is not the answer until stakeholders “buy-in” to the university/community service connection.

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APPENDIX A
STUDY I-- RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Hello everyone. My name is Andrea Clesi. I am a Master's student from the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication and I am conducting this research as part of my thesis. I will be your moderator for this focus group. Thank you so much for participating. Let's get started.

1. Do you participate in social networking sites?
2. If so, which ones do you use?
3. How often do you use these sites?
4. Do you participate in any LSU Web site now? If so, what do you like or dislike about the site?
5. Before we go to the next group of questions, what words would you associate with LSU?
6. In 2010, LSU is celebrating its sesquicentennial. As part of the celebration, the University is thinking about establishing a Web site that will feature volunteer work of LSU alumni, faculty and staff, and students. I am going to ask you a few questions about this proposed site and what would motivate you to participate.

Are you interested in participating in a Web site like this?

7. What would you like to see and read on the Web site?
8. How much time would you spend on a site like this?
9. What would motivate you to participate in a volunteer related Web site?
10. What do you think is the best way to let people know about a Web site like this?

APPENDIX B
STUDY II—PRE-TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age _____

2. **Gender**

- Male
- Female

3. **Which of the following are you?**

- LSU student
- LSU faculty member
- LSU staff member
- LSU alumnus

4. **Do you own a computer?**

- Yes
- No

5. **On average, how many hours do you spend on the Internet each day?**

- None to 1
- 1 to 2
- 3 to 5
- 6 or more

6. **In general, what is your comfort level using computers?**

- Not at all
- Comfortable
- Very comfortable

APPENDIX C
STUDY II--POST-TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1. I think that I would like to use this Web site frequently.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 2. I thought the Web site was easy to use.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 3. I would imagine that most people would learn to use this Web site quickly.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 4. I found the Web site very cumbersome to use.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 5. I felt very confident using the Web site.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 6. I found the Web site to be unnecessarily complex.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 7. I think I would need the support of a technical person to use this Web site.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

- 8. I thought there was too much inconsistency in this Web site.**

Strongly agree---5---4---3---2---1---Strongly disagree

VITA

Andrea Clesi received her bachelor of arts in journalism from Louisiana State University Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1978. She worked in the broadcast journalism field for 30 years. During her professional tenure, she received a number of awards for excellence in news reporting and community service. In 2005, the Louisiana Association of Broadcasters honored her with a lifetime achievement award. In 2003, she received the excellence award from Women in Media, and in 2001 she received the Public Relations Association of Louisiana “Communicator of the Year” award.

As a young reporter, Andrea received the Joseph Kennedy Foundation award for Distinguished Service to the Mentally Retarded. Eunice Kennedy Shriver presented Andrea with the award for special coverage of the 1979 International Special Olympic games. She also received the Louisiana Association of Educators excellence award for education reporting.

Clesi retired from the television news anchor desk in 2007 to pursue a Master of Arts from LSU’s Manship School of Mass Communication. She graduates in May, 2010.