

Conducting a Research-Based Audit for Higher Education Websites

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Abstract

What if you could find 20 ways to dramatically improve your school's website with only a few hours of work? The answers are hidden in your own site content. The question is how can you, with a limited amount of time and money, determine which improvements deserve the highest priority?

A site audit is a research-based exercise that can help any school better server a variety of online audiences, as they pursue a wide variety of goals. In this white paper we will

- ❖ Explain the purpose of a site audit.
- ❖ Outline some of the top goals for audiences of higher education web sites, based on our research.
- ❖ Provide detailed instructions for conducting a site audit.
- ❖ Describe research techniques for discovering user goals.

Introduction

Recruiting students to colleges and universities has become as much of a competition for the schools as it has for the students. Across the nation, schools are looking for every advantage possible to attract new students.

If the problem ended there, it would be a relatively easy fix: pour all of your online resources into doing whatever it takes to catch the eye of high school students. But as you are well aware, that's just the beginning.

College and university web sites serve several roles:

- ↻ Recruiting tool for prospective students
- ↻ Source of news for everything about the university
- ↻ Administrative resource for faculty and staff
- ↻ Course management for faculty and students
- ↻ Class registration for students
- ↻ Information directory
- ↻ Way for alumni to stay in touch

With so many people expecting so much from the site, it's hard to figure out which content is the most important and how to best serve every audience. A site audit can help clarify those needs and prioritize improvements.

What is a site audit?

A site audit is a structured evaluation of your site. Starting with a list of user goals and desires, you evaluate how quickly and easily someone can find the content or features that will help them accomplish those goals. Once you reach the information, you evaluate it for quality, ease of scanning, and other "visual writing" criteria. For even better insight into real user behavior, you can add baseline usability testing to this expert review.

Here are two examples of user goals:

- ↻ **Find out the size of the school, not just the raw number, but the feel of it.**
- ↻ **Find a faculty member who has particular expertise relevant to your research.**

How well does your site support these two goals?

The key to conducting a productive site audit is knowing what the most important user goals are. That's where research comes in. You can conduct your own, or rely on existing data. You'll find some of our favorite research techniques at the end of this paper.

The end result of the audit is a prioritized chart of improvements that can be made to your site. Many of them can be as simple as changing a link title.

One side benefit that we find in site audits is “buried treasure” – relevant and useful content that already exists on your site, but is difficult to find for one reason or another. For example, potential students really want to get a sense of your campus. If there are great pictures of the campus (and dorm rooms!) on your site, but no clear path to find them, that’s buried treasure.

Conducting baseline usability tests as part of the audit

Having an expert critique your site following these user goals is an excellent first step. You’ll uncover a number of possible improvements. We’re always amazed, though, how links or content that seem very obvious to us are invisible to others when we conduct usability tests. You’ll gain much deeper insight into user behavior by conducting baseline usability tests following scenarios based on the same goals you used for the audit.

Then, after you’ve made improvements to the site, you can test again following the same scenarios and compare your new results with these baseline tests.

You’ll find tips and resources for conducting usability tests at the end of this paper.

What if we can’t afford our own independent research?

Every school has things that make it unique, and these often lead to user goals that vary considerably from one school to another. For example, students considering a regional university with a reputation as a good business school will have different goals from students looking for a top-tier global research institution. The only way to discover those variations is to do your own research.

But there are many user goals that are consistent across schools of all shapes and sizes. We’ve worked with a diverse range of colleges and universities in the US and UK. That work has led us to the understanding that a small, private college in New England has more in common with a large, land-grant university in Virginia than either might like to admit. Simply put, there are commonalities across every school that you can use to ensure that your site is well designed and user-friendly.

The way each school responds to these common user goals is often quite different, however, and this is where brand differentiation comes in.

What our version of a site audit is NOT

You may have seen other descriptions of site audits that focus on technical issues like broken links, valid HTML/CSS, accessibility, security and so forth. These issues are very important and should be evaluated regularly, but they are not as central to the success of your web site as the question of *how well it supports the top goals of your key audiences*.

By all means you should regularly test your site for these issues.

Common goals among audiences of college and university web sites

The goals below are drawn from our research as well as studies by Noel-Levitz¹ and Stamats². As of August 2008 we have conducted over 130 interviews following the “mental model” approach with prospective undergraduate and graduate students, parents of prospective students, current students, faculty members, staff, alumni, media and members of the business community. In addition to this we have facilitated a number of “KJ Session” focus groups with key audiences. Both of these research methods are described in detail at the end of this paper.

While this is not an exhaustive list of common goals, the most important audience goals include:

All audiences:

- Search for contact information (phone, email) for someone at the school.
- Find out details about faculty members, including research interests, personal interests.
- Find out where on campus a particular department or office is located.
- Find out important dates for the term: start/end, exams and holidays.
- Get directions to the school (by car, plane, train, public transportation, foot, spaceship).
- Find out about parking on or near campus.
- Find a particular office or service on campus.

Prospective students:

- What are the demographics/diversity of the student body (ethnic, religious, socioeconomic level)? The questions behind this are: “Will I fit in? Are there other people like me there? Will my views be respected? Will I be able to make friends?”
- How big is the school?
- How is the school ranked? What makes it special?
- Does the reality of the school match the reputation?
- What are the details of a particular academic program?
 - What will I study?
 - What makes this program better/different than other schools?
 - How is this program/department ranked?
 - What kind of career can I pursue with this degree?

¹ *Engaging the “Social Networking” Generation*, research report sponsored by Noel-Levitz, James Tower and NRCCUA, 2007. www.noellelevitz.com

² *2007 TeensTALK®*, presentation given by Fritz McDonald of Stamats at CASE Communications, Marketing & Technology Conference, April 2008. www.stamats.com

- How much are the fees/tuition? What is the total cost? (People want to know all aspects of cost, including cost of living in the city/town.)
- What is life *really* like as a student? (They're basically looking for anything that helps them picture themselves going to school there.)
- What's it like going to school in this particular city or town? Are there lots of things for a college student to do? Is it safe? Is it easy to get around? (Off-campus stuff is often overlooked on college web sites.)
- What options do I have for housing? What do the dorm rooms look like?
- What is the food like? What are the dining options?
- Do you have clubs or organizations related to my interests? (Not just academic)
- What are the academic facilities, labs, etc. like? (People don't just want to see pictures of the outside of buildings.)
- Schedule a campus visit. What should I expect during the visit? Can I visit a class, see a dorm room, etc?
- Share a school or program I'm considering with a family member or friend, to get their opinion.
- Ask a question of someone in the admissions office (via phone, email or chat).
- Ask questions of current students.
- Meet other students who are considering this school, or planning to attend.
- Apply online.

Current students

- Find information about a particular student club or organization.
- Log in to class support sites or applications daily, to access assignments and notes, take quizzes and tests, or view grades.
- Planning which classes to take for the term, then registering for classes. (Unfortunately, this is often a complex, multi-step process involving offline and online resources.)

Faculty members and staff

- Access human resource functions, like benefits information or leave requests.
- See things that make me feel good about the institution and the direction it is taking. Like to see evidence of positive things going on, interesting research etc.
- Access administrative forms.
- Reserve or schedule a room on campus.
- Find out about events on campus. Hate hearing about an interesting event or lecture they just missed.
- Look for conflicts with other major events when planning an event.

- Look for other faculty or staff with expertise in a particular area.
- Learn about the organizational structure of a particular department. For example, who is a particular person's assistant?
- Look for research opportunities
- Conduct research using online resources.
- Work with other researchers using wikis and other online collaboration tools.
- Find something on the site for someone else, then tell that person how to find it.
- Get help with technology or infrastructure issues.
- Plan how to get to/from campus, especially if living in a city where commute or public transportation can be inconsistent.

Alumni:

- Keep up with school news, particularly if related to something they were involved in at school.
 - Read the alumni magazine.
 - Scan stories looking for names they recognize.
- See what's changing at the school that's related to their own experience, like buildings where they studied, departments they were in, clubs to which they belonged.
- What's happened to a particular teacher I knew?
- Find out about alumni events/reunions.
- Look for ways to stay involved with the school.
- Pass along information about the school to students I know who are interested in going there.
- Stay in touch with other alumni.
- Request transcripts.
- Find out about alumni benefits, like the ability to take classes after graduation.

Conducting the Site Audit

You can of course take whatever approach you like, but we recommend making a list of goals in a spreadsheet, grouped by audience.

Then go through each goal and assign a letter grade based on:

- ↻ Usability (ease of finding the information or feature)
- ↻ Content (the quality and completeness of the information or feature)
- ↻ Design/Branding Consistency

It's important to realize that the three criteria should not be judged independently. Usability and Content are especially interrelated - 50% of usability problems can be traced to the words we use.

Usability

Great content and flawless design don't mean much if your site isn't functional and user-friendly. That's why you should place great a deal of importance on things like:

- ↻ Navigation structure - Is there a clear and logical path to pursue a particular goal?
- ↻ Search results - Are results relevant, focused and distinct from each other?
- ↻ Forms - Are they easy to fill out, not too many fields?
- ↻ Online applications - Can they be easily understood and used by those unfamiliar with them?

Content

Examining content on the site means ensuring that it:

- ↻ provides the right information for accomplishing the related goal.
- ↻ is the appropriate amount of content for the stage where someone is in the process.
- ↻ is written "visually" – easy to scan, with short paragraphs, subheads introducing new topics, lists or tables where appropriate.
- ↻ is well written from the audience's perspective.
- ↻ offers clear links to the next steps.

Design/Branding Consistency

During a site audit, you should evaluate the consistency of the design as you move through the site. Not every page or sub-section needs to look the same, but there should be a clear sense that you are on the same overall web site.

- ↻ How is the school logo/name treated throughout the site?
- ↻ Is there a consistent way to get back to the main school home page?
- ↻ Are the colors compatible as you move through the site?

Making notes about the issues or problems that are uncovered is helpful when it comes time to prioritize content needs.

Below is an example of a site audit done in Excel. We've coded each row with different colors to indicate priority.

- Shades of orange = problems
- Green = content in reasonably good shape
- Purple = buried treasure (high priority content that's hard to find)

ABC University Site Audit		Rating	Notes
Support for Key Audience Goals			
Prospective Students & Parents			
Basic Facts, Comparison Factors		C+	
*	Demographics & diversity	B	Hard to find, no clear up front message
*	Size of the school	C	no indication - need an "at a glance" callout - like on the back of viewbooks
*	School ranking	X	important information, but not always easy to convey on your own site.
*	How far is it from home?	X	kind of left to figure that out - could have an easy google map app that had you put in your address and it plotted ABC and gave you distance - how would I get home, plane? drive? etc.
*	Will my cultural background or religious views be respected?	D	a single page of generic links buried in career services
Academics		C	
*	Course catalog more than just dry info	C	no course catalog, had to get class information by major/department
	Majors - clear info, requirements, what to expect each year	C	hit or miss as to whether major information included grad reqs
	Quality of academic facilities	X	
	Profiles of faculty	B	easily found, but hit or miss on information, depending on professor
	Ability to contact/email a faculty member	A	
	Will I get help with my studies if I need it?	C	found it after linking to site created by students
Cost		B-	
	Financial aid estimator form	D	Lots of hunting, found in Awarding Info - links to College Board tool, which is pretty far removed from ABC site, complicated.
	Tuition/cost/fees easily found & understood	B	found easily, but only broken out into a few broad categories
	Tuition cost calculator	X	
Housing & Food		D	
	Photos of dorm rooms	X	notta one
	Housing costs on and off campus	B	Room & Board easy to find, off-campus info buried, but well explained once found
	What's the food like?	B	hard to find! dining.ABC.edu has info, would like to see student testimonials, ratings
Student Life		B	
	Student profiles	B	There are Favorite ABC University moments which are much more personable - needs some polishing up but this could come to the surface more as a feature. Found some profiles on International School but they are lifeless.
	Email current students	B	buried, the information is great, list of student ambassadors by state is very nice
	Student and/or Faculty Blogs	C	International School has one - but no entries beyond 08-'07, CollegeOTR is another (all colleges) with ABC tags (drinking and sex

How it all comes together – an example

A prospective student who takes the time to request more information from the admissions office is clearly interested in your school. So this immediately ranks as a high priority task for you and the student. As part of the site audit, you should take a look at how easy it is to find some sort of a "Request Info" form.

Now, let's say that the form was easy to find – but when you got there it turned out to be a "formasaurus" – 30 questions guaranteed to scare away all but the most determined teenager. In this

case it probably earns a “C” – easy to find, but overwhelming to most users.

Another example is looking for information on a particular major, course or degree program. When a prospective student comes to your site, that’s one of the first things he or she is trying to find. Let’s say in this case he or she is looking for Biomedical Engineering, and you have a page about your Biomedical Engineering program that’s fantastic. It has:

- Engaging description of the program
- Bios of the faculty members with highlights of their research interests
- Testimonials or blogs from students in the program
- Examples of careers you can pursue in Biomedical Engineering
- What to expect each year in the program, descriptions of specific classes
- Links to student organizations related to Biomedical Engineering

But to find it this student first has to figure out if it’s in the School of Engineering, School of Medicine, or School of Life Sciences. Often schools force a student to figure out the school’s internal structure before he or she can find a particular program. If there’s no clear link from the home page to an A to Z list of degree programs, we would give this a “B.”

Generally speaking, we rate quality content that’s a little hard to find higher than poor content that’s easier to find, assuming that a determined user will track it down eventually or use the search feature.

Prioritizing content

Once the grading portion of the audit is complete, it’s time to move on to prioritizing content needs. This is done by comparing the results of the site audit with the results of the research. If your site is lacking in an area of content that the research tells you is very important, it should be coded as a high priority item.

That’s it! Now you can begin improving your web site with a clear, prioritized plan that ensures maximum return for your effort.

Research Techniques

Without reliable research into the goals and desires of your users, you are left with either 1) guesswork, or 2) comparing your web site with those of other schools. You may end up following examples that are misguided. Starting from a foundation of solid user research, a prioritized list of goals and tasks can be developed, which in turn helps you to prioritize your content needs.

The best way to ensure that your site is properly serving members of each audience is to talk to them. That can happen in any number of ways. Some of our favorites are:

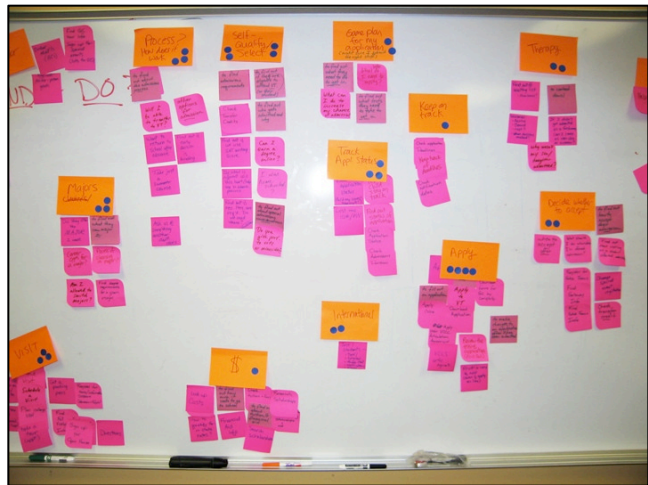
- ❖ **KJ Sessions** - a Post-it note brainstorming session with people representing your audiences.
- ❖ **Careword Surveys** - simple survey in which people select their top 10 words or phrases from a list of over 100 possible phrases representing user goals.
- ❖ **Mental Models** - diagrams showing user goals and tasks, based on in-depth interviews with users.

KJ Sessions

The KJ process was developed by Jiro Kawakita of Japan as a way for small groups to reach consensus on complex problems quickly. Organizations use it for things like strategic planning and problem solving. We have adapted it for site architecture.

The process works as follows:

1. Gather 4-6 people for about an hour and a half. These people should represent your key audiences, or be very familiar with them. It may be wise to hold multiple sessions for different audiences.
2. Ask a focus question – “What would people come to this web site to **FIND** or **DO**?”
3. Participants write as many answers as they can think of in 10-15 minutes, one per sticky note.
4. Put sticky notes on the wall in a big blob.
5. Without a lot of talking, the participants move similar items together into groups. Name the groups.
6. Vote on priorities.



The end-result of each KJ session is:

- ❖ Participants are starting to think about their site from the end-user’s perspective.



- ❖ You've created a prioritized list of user goals and tasks, some of which you may have had no idea about before. It's a short step from here to a site map.
- ❖ It's obvious to everyone what content you do or don't have and where you need to spend your time.
- ❖ The whole group agrees on the outcome. No single participant dominates the conversation.

Learn more about KJ Sessions at <http://www.newcitymedia.com/general/unlock-the-wisdom-of-your-group---host-a-kj-session-for-site-architecture/>

Careword Surveys

This is a survey technique developed by Gerry McGovern that is designed to identify the words or phrases your audiences are most likely to click on. People select their top 10 words or phrases from a list of about 125 terms related to your web site. Tally this up for 50 or more people and you have a statistically relevant list of your most important user goals, as well as the words they are most likely to click. This technique is also relatively inexpensive and fast.

Ability to explore ideas with lecturers	Fees	Putting students first
Ability to switch degrees	Focus on development of full individual	Quality content
Academic departments	Foreign students	Quality facilities
Accessibility	Friendly atmosphere	Quality search
Accommodation	Funding	Raising website awareness
Affordable accommodation	Future job prospects	Realising cost savings
Alumni	Getting Visa for university	Return on investment
Applying for grants	Good canteen	RSS
Archive	Good, cheap transport	Search engine optimisation
Authentication	Governance	Security
Better classification	Grant qualification criteria	Senior management buy-in
Better editing	Grants	Short courses
Better quality metadata	Hard to find what you need	Silo mentality
Better search	Help with Visa application	Simpler applications
Branding	Hospitality and conferencing	Simpler navigation
Business case	Inclusiveness	Site security
Career advice	Information architecture	SMS notification for important news
Centralization	Information overload	Social life
Centralization first steps	Lack of clear policies and procedures	Societies and clubs
Centralized approach success stories	Lack of real authority	Sports and recreation
City profile	Lecturer accessibility	Stakeholder management
Classification	Less is more approach	Strategy
Collaboration	Making friends	Student loneliness
Commissioning	Making students feel more informed	Student-focused
Common look and feel	Metadata	Style guide
Confusing navigation	Metrics	Support mission
Consistency	More applications	Technical capacity
Consistent navigation	More budget	Testing
Content is critical	More content	Too complicated
Content management systems	More fun	Too confusing
Continuing education	More funding	Too many clicks
Corporate and business partnerships	More openness	Too many websites
Cost of living	More staff	Too much to do, too little time
Course materials	Nightlife	Too slow
Cross-department collaboration	No clear strategy	Top quality professors/lecturers
Current students	Nobody in charge	Top ranking course
Cutting-edge research	Not being found in search engines	Top ranking university
Data Protection	Open days	Training
Defining roles and responsibilities	Out-of-date content	Undergraduate

Learn more about the Carewords Survey technique at <http://www.customercarewords.com/>



Recommended Reading

Young, Indi, *Mental Models: Aligning Design Strategy with Human Behavior*, Rosenfeld Media, 2008

Krug, Steve, *Don't Make Me Think*, New Riders Press, 2005

Rubin, Jeffrey, and Chisnell, Dana, *Handbook of Usability Testing*, Wiley, 2008

McGovern, Gerry, *Killer Web Content*, A&C Black, 2007

Redish, Janice (Ginny), *Letting Go of the Words*, Morgan Kaufmann, 2007

Eisenberg, Bryan, and Eisenberg, Jeffrey, *Call to Action: Secret Formulas to Improve Online Results*, Thomas Nelson, 2006

Why New City Media?

A helpful site audit clearly requires more than guess work. We have developed expertise in the needs of audiences in higher education. Regardless of your size, location or budget, you'll benefit from work we've done with small and large universities, regional colleges and top tier research institutions.

The site audit process comes naturally for us because we have always placed a great deal of emphasis on user experience. We'll show you how every aspect of a site should be considered part of the design process, whether it's crafting the words on screen or grouping of related links.

About New City Media

New City Media was started by David Poteet in 1995 with the crazy (at the time) notion that the Internet was really about communication, not technology. Communication between humans. In that sense it's like a "new city" because it opens the door for communities and connections that aren't restricted by geography.

NCM employs 19 people in its office in Blacksburg, Virginia, and serves clients in the US and Europe.

Contact Us

If you have questions about this white paper, or if you think your site could benefit from an audit, please contact:

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