Eight Tools for Evaluating Legal Services Websites

By Hugh Calkins

Website evaluation presents some unique challenges and there isn't a lot of accumulated wisdom. Most "clients" are remote and anonymous and like it that way. Although we can know some things about site users and site use, what we know is driven more by technology than by principles of evaluation. Voluntary website feedback is notoriously hard to get, and limiting site access to those willing to provide feedback is counterproductive. Nonetheless, there are at least eight tools we have used in addition to more traditional evaluation methods. (See Karen Monahan's paper on usability testing and courthouse terminal monitoring.) These tools help us to evaluate both how useful our websites are and how we can improve them.

Google Search Engine Page Rank as a Website Evaluation Tool

The highly regarded search engine Google (http://www.google.com) explains its page ranking as follows:

"Page Rank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important."

"Important, high-quality sites receive a higher PageRank, which Google remembers each time it conducts a search. Of course, important pages mean nothing to you if they don't match your query. So, Google combines PageRank with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both important and relevant to your search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines all aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query." (http://www.google.com/technology/index.html)

A search for "legal help in Maine" produces HelpMeLaw (Pine Tree's umbrella legal services website), Pine Tree Legal Assistance, and Maine's Legal Services for the Elderly as the first three search returns. A search for "legal help in South Carolina" produces South Carolina Legal Services Programs as the first search return.

A search for "legal help in Florida" produces first the Florida Attorney General's vanity page, but no Florida legal services program website in the first 150 search returns, even though there are at least nine such websites in the state. A cursory and subjective review of the Florida sites suggests that, although some of them are quite flashy, only one makes any substantial attempt to present substantive legal information for clients.

In addition to Google's claims for page rank as identifying "important, high-quality sites," page rank provides another element for website evaluation. Many clients who are looking for help on the internet use the search engines (Google, Yahoo, AltaVista, etc.) to find information. About twenty percent of site visits to the Pine Tree website come from search engines. If these searches do not deliver the information provided by legal services websites, then having information on our websites if of little value to those clients using the search engines. There are a number of things that can be done with a web page to make it more available to search engines, such as adding keywords and other metatags. If a site doesn't test well in search engines, some attention should be paid to making it more accessible.

Site Use Statistics as a Website Evaluation Tool

Although site use does not measure "outcomes," it does measure the value, or at least the anticipated value, that internet users ascribe to a website. For example, the Pine Tree Legal Assistance website (http://www.ptla.org) and the Volunteer Lawyers Project website (http://www.vlp.org) have both been on the internet since 1996. In January 2002, the VLP website was visited 2,751 times and produced 4,423 page views. In January 2002, the PTLA website was visited 32,432 times, and produced 75,989 page views.

The obvious reason for this large difference is that more internet users expect that they will find useful information at the PTLA site than at the VLP site. Indeed, the Pine Tree site is where we put lots of client education and pro se assistance material that we believe will be valuable to large numbers of low-income clients. The VLP site is limited to information about the organization and information of use to attorney and lay volunteers.

Pine Tree has maintained site use statistics since the inception of its website. In the site's first full month of use, it experienced 881 "hits," most of them probably self-induced. By the end of the first year, in April 1997, it experienced 24,638 monthly "hits." In April, 2000, it experienced more than 100,000 "hits," and nearly 30,000 "page views," a much more useful statistic. By April 2001, there were 48,503 "page views," and in January 2002, 75,989 "page views."[1]

At Pine Tree Legal Assistance, we further refine the "page view" statistic to measure the number of views of each page, including specific pieces of client education and self-help information. Attached, as an addendum, is the statistical analysis of Pine Tree's site for

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[1] Although "page view" can be configured to include different things, for the Pine Tree site, it means a single document file of information, no matter the number of "pages" the document occupies when printed out. A "hit" is any file, including graphics files and other elements of dynamically created pages. One document of information with many graphics can produce a lot of hits – a statistic of interest to administrators of web servers, but of little use to providers of information. We no longer use "hits" as a measure of site use. A site visit is one visit to the website, no matter how many pages are viewed. We also find that statistics showing average time spent viewing a particular page to be useful, highlighting the pages that users are reading and studying more thoroughly.

2001. The interest in a particular page or topic is very useful to us in setting priorities for developing and updating client education material.

Site use statistic programs can measure many other things, as well, including the number of site visits, the average time spent on a site visit, the average time spent on a page, and in the more robust analysis programs, the amount of time spent on each specific page. They can measure the paths taken through the site most frequently, or by a particular site user. They can count the number of site visits by return visitors and those by first time visitors.

There is much more information that can be gathered by these programs, and others more sophisticated, much of it very esoteric. The two programs I am familiar with are LiveStats, used by the Pine Tree Legal Assistance and Volunteer Lawyers Project websites (published by DeepMetrix Corporation, http://www.deepmetrix.com/), and WebTrends, used by the HelpMeLaw and Maine Equal Justice Project websites (published by NetIQ Corporation, http://www.webtrends.com/). More information is available on their websites.

Website User Feedback as an Evaluation Tool

For many years, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has had a "Feedback" form linked from each of its client education pages, and other places on the Pine Tree website. The form is at http://www.ptla.org/questions.htm.

We use checkboxes to ask information about where the user is from, how the information from the site is to be used, and the income level of the site user. The form also has some open-ended questions about what client education materials have been used, what other materials the user would like to see, and space for any other comments. Form submission results are saved on a private page on the website, and are sent by e-mail to the webmaster. Anyone can be designated to receive this information.

Our experience is that a very small percentage of site visitors submit the feedback form – 164 submissions since April 2000. In spite of the low return rate, it has been helpful to us to know that more than half of those submitting the form report themselves as being low-income. Another substantial percentage report that they are getting information for someone else who is low-income. More than half of those reporting tell us that they were looking for information about a specific legal problem or to use in court. More than three-quarters report either that they live in Maine or will use the information in Maine. Although there have been a lot of nice comments, we have found the open-ended questions – text boxes – to be of value only occasionally.

No doubt, a better feedback instrument could be devised.

There are e-mail links on many of the Pine Tree website pages, and on all of the HelpMeLaw pages. These are used more frequently than the feedback form, but are less subject to categorization. For example, in January 2002, info@ptla.org received 45

meaningful e-mail messages (out of more than 32,000 site visits). The majority of those were requests for contact information ("How can I find a similar information in my state?), eligibility information or legal information. (Although all e-mail links say "Sorry we cannot respond to requests for information or legal help by e-mail," that doesn't stop folks from trying, and we do end up responding to a lot of them). A number of the messages provided vague feedback: "Great site, keep up the good work." "I couldn't find what I was looking for. I need information on _____." Many of the e-mail messages related to use of our interactive forms, and a high percentage of those provided specific useful feedback: "There is a misspelled word in _____ form." "Can you change the font size in _____ form so I can put in more information?" In January, as in previous months, we made several improvements in the forms because of this feedback.

Literacy Level as a Website Evaluation Tool

For legal services websites posting information for clients it is important that the information be presented in a way that is most easily understandable by our client population. At Pine Tree Legal Assistance, we have used as our goal a fifth grade literacy level on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level measurement tool. (This paper, for example, uses a lot of big words and overly complex sentences, and has a grade level score of 12, compared to a Hemingway short story with a grade level score of 4.)

Although Flesch-Kincaid is not the most highly regarded literacy tool, it has been one of the easiest, because it has been bundled with Microsoft Word and WordPerfect. Word now includes two readability tests in Word 2002 – the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score, and the Flesch Reading Ease score. Literacy experts in the public nursing world tell us that this Flesch tool is more accurate and useful than the Flesch-Kincaid. WordPerfect 10 now makes additional analysis of use of passive voice, sentence complexity and vocabulary complexity, (as well as comparing readability to Hemingway, the Gettysburg Address and the 1040EZ instructions, or any other designated document).

It is an easy matter to take any client-oriented text document and use the analysis tools in these two word processors. Web-based resources such as the Plain Language Network can help in figuring out how to improve readability score. See the "Writing User Friendly Documents" guide at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/handbook/index.htm .

Handicapped Access as a Website Evaluation Tool

Many among our client population are handicapped, and we have vigorously advocated their rights in court and other forums. Until recently, however, few legal services websites paid attention to the needs of this part of our client community. For example, when we first analyzed the Pine Tree Legal Assistance website for accessibility using the Bobby analysis tools, only four of our more than five hundred web pages passed the Bobby test.

 The Web Access Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium (http://www.w3.org/WAI) has promulgated guidelines for website accessibility and 36

CFR Part 1194 (implementing Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998) has been promulgated governing federal websites. Legal services websites should aspire to these standards.

Bobby software will analyze a website pursuant to either the W3 Guidelines or the §508 regulations. You can analyze individual pages from the Bobby website (http://www.cast.org/bobby/). To analyze an entire site you need to download the software. Older versions of the software were available free. The current version costs $99. WebAble (http://www.webable.com/index.html) has similar software available, and will do a free preliminary site analysis. See also, Usability.gov (http://usability.gov/index.html).

Dynamic Feedback as a Website Evaluation Tool

Static web pages are much like paper documents. They consist of a series of words and pictures strung together and made available for viewing and printing. The majority of those are html (hypertext markup language or .pdf (portable document format) pages, but can be word processing and other types of documents. They are an excellent way to present information. The Pine Tree Legal Assistance website consists almost entirely of static web pages.

However, many websites are now being built as dynamic websites with the ability to create web pages "on the fly" in response to input from the site user. It is possible to design a site that captures information from these dynamic interactions. The HelpMeLaw site has one such tool in its "search log."

One of the core functions of the HelpMeLaw site is its so-called "smart search engine." That provides a means for users to search for Maine-oriented legal information and help based on their specific legal problem. The website has been designed so that it captures every search that is done and the results of that search.

We look regularly at the search log to review and evaluate every search to determine whether the results are appropriate to what the client is searching for. A wide range of adjustments can be made to the search engine that can make the results more appropriate. Sometimes, however, a client may be searching for information that isn't available. We can then make a determination whether or not to find or create information that responds to that particular question.

For example, we chose to ignore the fact that a search for "walking tours in Ireland" produced no results. Finding a number of searches for information about guardians ad litem in the Maine courts, we looked for other information on the web that we could include within the scope of the search engine, but finding nothing acceptable, determined to create our own client education material that would respond to the search.

Site Architecture Analysis

Although there are no real standards for website architecture, several people have attempted to develop some principles and ideas. Foremost is the work of Jakob Nielsen (http://www.useit.com), as well as the Yale University Web Style Guide (http://www.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents.html). See also, Nielsen's book Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity. Although Nielsen is sometimes extremist in his views, the principles of simplicity, clarity, lack of clutter, short principal pages, and others that he espouses are particularly important for the legal services client population.

Software Tools for Site Evaluation

There is a plethora of software tools for doing technical evaluations of websites. These evaluate such things as load times, server down time, browser compatibility, broken links, slow-loading graphics, code and scripting errors, etc. Most html editing and site management software, such as FrontPage and Dream Weaver, include some of these features. Other analysis software is available for purchase, as shareware or freeware. The Software Q&A/Test Resource Center lists a large number of these resources at http://www.softwareqatest.com/qatweb1.html. One of the more popular, easier to use, and less technical resources is the on-line service of NetMechanic (http://www.netmechanic.com/). For a small subscription price, NetMechanic will monitor a site and regularly report on broken links, code errors, browser compatibility and other problems. NetMechanic also provides a range of repair tools for the problems it uncovers.

Conclusion

None of these tools do more than touch on "client outcomes" – "Did your website change your clients' lives for the better?" Nonetheless, they do provide some methods for responding to the Bob Cohen evaluation mantra, "Is it used and is it useful?" We have tried to use the tools for what we believe is the ultimate goal of evaluation – the continual refinement and improvement essential to ensuring that the sites are valuable resources.