

Communicating value online

Higher Education Minister David Lammy has told universities they need an image overhaul. Speaking to vice chancellors at the Universities UK Annual Members' Conference he said that the sector needed to look at how it might 'communicate its value better'.

He said that while universities were adept at marketing themselves internationally, the British public's perception of them was 'outdated'. He warned of likely funding cuts and even linked future settlements with the sector improving its image with taxpayers.

Focusing particularly on online communications, Mr Lammy pointed out the contrast with American universities who make much of their economic and social contribution. "Visit the website of any US state university," he said, "and you'll see what I mean. The payback that taxpayers get for their investment will be right up front – in words, in figures and in case studies."

Join us at our exclusive **'Effective university websites'** seminar on 16th October from 12-2pm.

Email digital@uffindellwest.com to register your attendance.

How do you communicate value?

Our own review of the higher education sector websites shows that most universities continue to focus their websites on targeting prospective students – they simply function as an online prospectus. The opportunity is for universities to embrace the best of today's web functionality and use it to create websites that engage the wider community, serving all stakeholders – students, staff, prospective students, parents, alumni, business and industry, local community, government, the media and, importantly, the wider public i.e. taxpayers.

Which universities are getting it right?

Cornell University's website www.cornell.edu is worthy of praise. It communicates the university's social and community activity via Outreach and Land Grant sections (both are prominent in the site's navigational structure).

What's more, the university's public and economic value are made clear through such statements as: 'Cornell directs its education, applied research, and outreach to benefit the citizens of New York'; 'As New York State's land grant university, Cornell applies university-based knowledge to practical benefits which in turn contribute to the State's economic prosperity.'

So they've got the message right, but how is that message best delivered online? What features and functionality will grab your audience's attention? Our research has revealed that the higher education sector has a long way to go in offering the best user experience.

Advances in web technologies are enabling websites to promote greater user interaction and personalisation, ultimately making them easier to use and to understand. Rich media and, in particular, video is being used to attract and engage – and is having far more

impact than text and images alone. Social media, with the potential to build communities around products, services and brands, is being embraced to great effect.

A university website taking advantage of any or all the above would steal a march on their competitors and in our opinion reap the rewards. Web users catch up with trends quickly and turn them in to expectations. It's vital that you're not left behind with a web 1.0 website.

Some top online tips

We've put together some practical tips to help you to make the transition to a highly effective website:

1. Something useful for everyone

University websites must cater for a diverse audience. Potential and existing students, undergraduates, postgraduates, staff, alumni, business, taxpayers, etc. It's an extensive list. Offer content tailored for each audience but also give each audience a reason to come back. Create a community site. A hub for sharing community activity. For example listings of arts, cultural and sports events which are open to the wider public.

2. User test

User testing with representatives from each target audience group is the best way to spot usability problems. Nothing is more convincing than watching real interactions with an existing or proposed site and doing so will uncover very specific areas for improvement.

A user testing program should start at the design prototype stage and run throughout the entire build. Not forgetting accessibility user tests to ensure DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliance.

3. Findability

Many university websites contain thousands of pages of content. Plan your site's structure (its information architecture) with great care. Stack content in to logical blocks and test these structures with target audience groups. Clear signposting is vital on each page. Give users obvious next steps and calls to action. Make site entry points, most importantly the homepage, work hard to offer relevant content for each audience.

4. Design the information

Information rich websites must be simple and intuitive to use - enabling the user to engage with the content without having to consciously think about how to get to it. Position page elements where users would expect to find them and create clear layouts uncluttered by purely aesthetic design elements. Design the information, not the page.

5. Include social media

Web audiences increasingly expect, and look for, user opinion and peer review. Student and staff blogs are a fantastic way to communicate the reality of university life. Allowing user comment also shows a transparent and confident approach. Show that you have nothing to hide, and everything to share.

How UffindellWest can help

If you'd like a helping hand with transforming your website, we can help. Working with our clients we seek out the core messages, the content that will engage, inform and inspire. Then we design this information at site and page level, prioritising and refining as we go. We create user interactions with the same level of attention. Every click, every stage along a user task is considered and rationalised. Providing a good 'user experience' is as important as a site's content. Take a look at a new site we recently designed for the British Computer Society www.bcs.org

But, remember, a website is just the start. A true digital approach embodies complementary elements such as social media.

Come along to our '**Effective university websites**' lunch seminar where we'll explore in more detail the approaches and techniques outlined in this article.

Date Friday 16 October

Location UffindellWest,
24 St John Street, London EC1M 4AY

Time 12-2pm

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