

If You Build It They Will Come...Maybe...

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the concept of target users and user segmentation as a method for heightening strategic planning for digital libraries and as a way to increase the efficiency and power of evaluation efforts for digital libraries is advanced. Target user development has a long history in marketing, but the benefits of this approach transcend any one discipline. This paper was developed for the JCDL 2009 workshop: User-Friendly Evaluation Knowledge for Digital Librarians.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.7 [Digital Libraries]: User Issues.

General Terms

Management, Measurement, Performance, Design, Experimentation, Human Factors,

Keywords

Digital Library Evaluation, Evaluation Methodology, Target User, User Segmentation.

1. INTRODUCTION TO TARGET USERS

A common mistake that entrepreneurs, web designers and marketers make is developing products, services or websites without a clear understanding of their end-users. Too much emphasis on the end-deliverable and too little on what customers truly want and need often has a devastating impact on overall success. Similarly, developers of digital libraries often view their collection from a very egalitarian perspective. Frequently digital libraries are developed with a broad focus and a “build it and they will come” approach. However, this is done often without clearly articulating and knowing who “they” refers to. This approach has the potential to degrade the focus of evaluation efforts, hinder an understanding of how to grow usage or how to promote their site, and can potentially even hurt opportunities to apply or secure alternate funding for a project.

One way to have your site ideals coexist with your site’s pragmatic needs is to develop a target user profile. The development of a user profile requires you to identify a group of people or organizations sharing one or more characteristics that cause them to have similar product and/or service needs. The most effective profiles meet the following criteria: the target profile is distinct from other profiles (different profiles have different

needs), and it is relatively homogeneous within a target profile (exhibits common needs). However, even apart from this ideal state, doing work to develop a targeted focus for who you plan on serving at the outset can reap rewards in the end.

This paper will provide a brief justification for using target customers, overview options for target customer development, and highlight the specific utility of a target customer as a lens in digital library evaluations.

2. WHY DO I NEED A TARGET USER?

Publicly accessible libraries, by their very nature, are egalitarian institutions. Materials are available to everyone. However, that does not mean that targeting everyone will lead to more site usage. In fact, that broad focus waters down the message of what you offer to users and actually works against broader participation. History has shown that you have a greater overall success when you aim for a specific, well-defined target. And, despite popular belief, this approach will not exclude broader participation on your website. Rather, if done correctly, usage will not only increase across your target user group, but other users will also be attracted to your site and will be likely to turn to you when the need for information you offer arises. [1]

It is also important to develop a target user to break through search “clutter” and to maximize usability of a site design. With the rise of the internet over the past few decades, consumers’ access to and options for gathering information have increased exponentially. With the mere click of a button, consumers can be presented with a list of resource choices to get what they are looking for. As a result, the end user is in control [2]. Many times, users spend only seconds assessing whether to search your offerings or to leave your site for another that seems better able to meet their needs [3]. Consequently, understanding who the key users of your site are, what their needs and motivations are for potentially using your site, and what they want from a digital library is essential. This will allow you to: promote your website more effectively; to identify and develop collections more efficiently; to user-test with more accuracy; to organize your information in a way that is meaningful to your target user; to effectively design a search interface and features on your site; and to outline a future direction of your site with more clarity.

3. HOW TO DEVELOP A TARGET USER

Developing a target user profile starts with segmentation. George Day [4] outlined two approaches to segmentation: a top-down and a bottom-up approach. In a top-down approach you start with the entire universe and divide it into segments, and in a bottom-up approach you formulate a customer profile and build upon that profile as your business or needs grow.

More specifically, segmentation is the process of categorizing people into like groups. People within a group have shared characteristics, but across the various groups there are observable key differences [5]. There are many ways to effectively segment the population, including demographics (e.g., life stage, school-type, discipline), needs/attitudes/behaviors (e.g., functional benefits), geographic (e.g., regions, countries, cities, zip codes) or psychographic (e.g., core values) [6]. The segmentation scheme you select should be aligned with the overall objective that you are trying to accomplish. Regardless of the segmentation scheme that you seek to employ, there are criteria that must be met to deem any segmentation “good” [7]. For example, your target customer group must be easily identifiable, large enough in size, relatively stable, accessible, receptive to your messages, and willing to take action. Understanding these key criteria and how to assess your potential segments will help to ensure your target customer profile is actionable and effective.

In the case of digital libraries, given that many libraries were started around a specific content area (i.e. Math, Biology, etc.) it may make sense to use a bottom-up scheme, and start with biology. However, from there you can refine this segmentation by asking who does want to serve (instructors or students)? You can further refine your segment by asking what type of institution your library wants to serve? (K-12? Community Colleges? Doctoral Universities?) . By putting this stake in the ground you are also positioning a growth plan for your digital library. So, if I determine that in year one I want to my library to focus on biology instructors in middle and high schools, in year two I can expand this scope outward if I am successful. In year two I may introduce an expanded target that may include introductory course instructors and teaching assistants at large doctoral granting universities. In short, target user development provides a programmatic development plan for growth of your digital library.

A successful target development should enable you to answer the following key questions: How should I allocate my resources and time? What does this group want/ need? How is this group changing? Segmenting your market not only helps you identify who is currently using what you have to offer, but will also help you to theorize on who may use your site in the future and anticipate those needs. [8].

4. TARGETS AS AIDS FOR EVALUATION

4.1 A Corporate Example

In addition to aiding strategic planning for a digital library, the development of a target customer greatly increases the efficiency and explanatory power of evaluation efforts. I will discuss an example where a target customer increases efficiency in a

formative evaluation effort and an example where a target increased the explanatory power of data.

As a formative evaluation example, the strongest case can be made for a target customer is in simple usability testing of a site. Without testing reactions of a target customer, you will be getting feedback that will smooth out the largest bumps, but could be missing feedback that could increase usability among the group of most interest. For example, a large international automobile company knew that the majority of people buying their cars were professional women. In fact, they used females to test and refine their designs. They found that if they met the expectations of females, males’ were more than satisfied. However, they did not initially carry this focus to their website. They conducted general population usability and feedback assessments, and ignored their target customer. Shortly after releasing their site, the company started getting email from angry/ disappointed/ confused customers who felt like the site was difficult to navigate or not what they expected. Now this company user-tests any site redesigns with their target customer as a specific part of that process. They may test other user groups, but their target users need to be satisfied first. Having this focus allows for easier recruitment for usability testing, and offers a richer lens for interpreting usability results.

4.2 A Physical Library Example

In the UK, a new paradigm for physical libraries is gaining popularity. The new paradigm is called the idea store. This new vision for a library evolved out of “London’s most comprehensive opinion survey about libraries.” [9] What they found is that while many people liked the idea of a library and thought library staff were doing an amiable job, many people were dissatisfied with current way library services were being delivered. Consequently, an old library building was raised, and a new “idea store” was erected in its place that built upon the research findings. The idea store adopted a target customer as essentially the future library user. They tailored services to meet this underserved clientele. This included offering more technology, more training, more formal classes and highlighting multimedia offerings. These new libraries have been a tremendous success with the targeted user and beyond. Additionally, the idea store is constantly expanding its reach by using programs or classes that reach out to groups not directly in its target. For example, the idea store sets aside a space and each week as “coffee morning for seniors.” Whereas the old library got between 250- 300 clients a day, the new library serves over 1,000 a day [10]. In short, the target did not alienate groups; rather it helped identify ways to serve groups more effectively.

4.3 A Digital Library Example

As an illustration of how target customer can help in the interpretation of data, AMSER is a pathways project of the NSF funded NSDL program. AMSER had developed a narrow focus of serving community and technical college STEM instructors. However, a web-intercept survey conducted over an 8-month period showed a significant number of doctoral institution and liberal arts instructors were also visiting their site. This provided an opportunity to ask several questions: What is it in promotional efforts that are drawing this group? Are we satisfying this group? Is this a base that could serve as a jumping off point for a new grant or an extension of the existing grant? All of these are useful considerations that would have been neglected if there had not

been a focused, targeted library user through which to think about this data.

5. IN CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to outline the concept of target users with the hopes of illustrating the value this tactic could hold in the process of evaluating digital libraries. However, it is understood that on the face this may seem antithetical to broad inclusionary notions that are the foundation for many digital libraries, but public libraries are starting to adopt this notion of targeting users, and these institutions have seen broader participation in, and more favorable impressions of, their libraries.

With increasing focus from granting agencies being given to demonstrating the impact of digital libraries, it is incumbent upon library developers and researchers alike to scope boundary conditions around that impact. Developing target users offer one method for doing this. Developing target users also provides benefits relating to planning for a digital library's growth. A target user can also help provide a lens for interpreting a variety of evaluation feedback, and provides grounding for any reported results.

While adopting a target user is an under-utilized practice in digital library evaluation, it is never too late to develop a target user profile. And, you may come to the conclusion that the best way to grow your digital library is to narrow the focus of who you want your library to serve. In fact, your greatest obstacle may be convincing other digital libraries and granting agencies that less is indeed more.

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