

Published in the August, 2005 issue of ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership's Technoscope newsletter.

Improving Member Access to Information

According to Whatis.com, the term business intelligence was used as early as September 1996, when a Gartner Group report said, "By 2000, information democracy will emerge in forward-thinking enterprises, with business intelligence information and applications available broadly to employees, consultants, customers, suppliers, and the public. The key to thriving in a competitive marketplace is staying ahead of the competition. Making sound business decisions based on accurate and current information takes more than intuition. Data analysis, reporting, and query tools can help business users wade through a sea of data to synthesize valuable information from it—today these tools collectively fall into a category called 'business intelligence.'"

Business intelligence can be used to define how organizations use data to evaluate and plan for the tools they need for customer interaction and service delivery. During the last three years in particular, Associations have been increasingly interested in evaluating how their Web sites and other Internet tools are delivering services to their customers. If you have been advocating for data-focused decision making in your association, break out the business intelligence mantra and use these three examples as inspiration for how your organization can improve decision support for its Web site and technology development.

Web site usability studies

The American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) in Fairfax, Virginia, conducted a Web site usability study in 2004 to re-examine the structure and organization of its Web site (from the user's perspective) and to gain feedback on what additional products, services, content, and offerings might prove valuable to site visitors.

The results from the survey, focus groups, and user tests allowed AIHA to make immediate changes to the way site visitors access industry information on AIHA.org. For example, based on the feedback received, all extraneous logos were removed from the home page, including the magazine cover, journal cover, and consultants' listing logo. These graphics were replaced with action statements (e.g., Calculate your salary...). Peter J. O'Neil, CAE, assistant executive director, said, "This was a help because it freed up space for links to important, highly used parts of our site and ultimately increased the number of click-throughs to these areas because our members no longer mistook the graphics as advertisements, which was what was occurring."

Since the study last year, AIHA has used feedback from this usability study to renavigate the way in which members access information throughout its site. The association plans to unveil a new feel to the site this summer based directly on the results of the study.

The Equipment Leasing Association, Arlington, Virginia, took a multidimensional approach to reviewing its electronic communication channels: ELAOnline.com and *ELT Enews Daily* newsletter. The association wanted to understand the performance, attributes, and weaknesses of the current site; better understand its visitor base, usage patterns, and preferences; survey the landscape of possibilities for site enhancement, and develop a set of actionable recommendations to put into effect.

The overall goal was to realize greater value from its Web site in the areas of member satisfaction, retention, and growth. Additionally, in 2004 ELA consolidated two newsletters to create *ELT Enews Daily* e-newsletter. Because of its importance as a communication

channel, the association sought to evaluate its impact and value, and to get direction for any improvements.

The study included a Web site assessment, user surveys of its Web site users and newsletter readers, in-depth staff and member interviews, and a competitive analysis for each product. Don Ethier, CAE, ELA's vice president of marketing and communications, said, "This comprehensive study told us the strengths and weaknesses of our products versus the competition and gave us the information we need for our planning."

ELA received validation that both ELAonline.com and *ELT Enews Daily* are keystones of membership value for the organization. It also received specific, actionable recommendations for content and navigation improvement to its Web site, allowing the association to allocate resources to where it will have the most immediate, noticeable results. These changes will be incorporated into the new ELAOnline.com that will launch later this year.

E-learning feasibility study

In 2002, a major priority outlined in the strategic plan of the National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA) was to enhance the electronic delivery of its program and services. To facilitate this process, NACUA appointed a Task Force on Electronic Delivery to develop an action plan to enhance members' desktop access to NACUA's electronic services. The association also undertook a distance education study that included a survey of its members to determine which new technologies they wanted the association to offer, an environmental scan of comparable associations to determine which electronic services other groups were using successfully, and a compilation of potential new technologies and vendors NACUA should consider.

The results of the study validated that NACUA was already moving in the right direction with its recently launched virtual seminars and its conference and workshop materials on CD-ROM. Several new initiatives such as Web site enhancements and webcasting were recommended as considerations for future implementation.

John Bishop, NACUA's director of information services, said, "The Task Force on Electronic Delivery used the results of this survey to develop a plan for enhancing NACUA's electronic delivery of programs and services and presented its findings to the board of directors. The board supported the plan and agreed to apply a portion of the strategic initiatives fund to support any new or enhanced electronic services. The board also asked NACUA's strategic planning and finance committees to review the plan so that any new initiatives could be incorporated into the association's work plan and become part of NACUA's operating budget."

Putting it to work for you

These examples show how business intelligence gathering can turn data into real results. Your objective may be to validate your association's activities, direct short-term tactical and long-term strategic technology improvements, or even prevent unnecessary investment in new technologies. Whatever the outcome, your association can use business intelligence to base its decisions on data—not intuition.

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