A Tale of 2 Newspaper Web Redesigns: Part 1

posted: 2/11/1998

by: Steve Outing

Highlighted at last week's Interactive Newspapers conference in Seattle were two prominent newspaper Web site redesigns -- the Chicago Tribune and the Christian Science Monitor. They are like night and day.

The Chicago Tribune's site re-launched with a major redesign just two weeks ago. It is a controversial design, to say the least, and it pushes the envelope on Web site interface design. Ironically, the Tribune won three awards in the EPpy online newspaper competition, but the judges were primarily reviewing the Tribune site's old look. The industry said to the Tribune, "your site ain't broke," but the newspaper fixed it anyway.

The Christian Science Monitor's site is about to undergo a redesign, and Monitor online editors showed off the new look in Seattle. While the Tribune site is boldly going where no newspaper Web site has gone before, the Monitor might be accused of boldly going where we have already been. The news portions of the site will soon look like -- newspaper pages! Using software from UK-based Infosis, th e Monitor site will include facsimile pages from the print edition, in which users click on a headline to bring up the full text of a story in another part of the screen.

Which direction is the correct one?

Both site designs have much good about them, though both are controversial. What this shows is that in the Internet environment, there's no such thing as unanimity about what best serves readers. Where the Society of News Design's annual best of newspaper design publication tends to showcase how homogeneous printed newspapers are, a comparison of news Web sites shows how far apart in approach are some sites.

Depending on your audience dynamics, you can look to either of these sites for inspiration. I'm not willing to say that either one of these newspapers has got it right -- or wrong. News publishing on the Web remains a grand experiment, and these two contrasting redesigns confirm that experimentation will remain the mode for some time to come.

For today's column, let's take a look at the Tribune site. In my next column (Friday, February 13), I'll discuss the Monitor's redesign.

The Trib's risky move

The Tribune site with its redesign is trying to be "an Internet newspaper, where everyone else is doing a newspaper on the Web," says Howard Witt, associate managing editor/interactive news. It does not look like other newspaper sites, and it rejects many of the conventions of newspapers on the Web to date. Yet it holds on to the notion that there is a newspaper behind the site, still leveraging that strong relationship.

The most strikingly new aspect of the Tribune site is the concept of "splash screens." When you visit the home page, you get a Web page where all of the content fits on a single, non-scrollable screen. The bulk of the screen real estate is taken up by a series of 6-8 rotating splash screens, which change every 12-20 seconds and highlight content within the Web site. When a particular screen is visible, you can click on it to go to that section. Below the splash screens are rotating banner ads.

(Witt says that early viewer tracking is showing that more than half of the visitors to the new home page are watching the page long enough for the splash screens to rotate through before clicking elsewhere.)

Also on the main page are seven key categories -- News, Sports, Business, Interact, etc. -- that get you inside the site quickly and turn off the rotating splash screens. This is an improvement over the old home page, which offered the home page visitor up to 60 choices. A simpler, streamlined navigation scheme was necessary, says Witt.

The site was designed as a means to "break the bounds of the fold," says Witt, using an old print newspaper metaphor. It's well known that the majority of Web site visitors don't look beyond what they initially see on the home page of a site; they never scroll down to see what else is on the page but not visible, they never "get below the fold." The idea is to present everything from the small space of a single computer screen. The design also is meant to serve advertisers, who complained about the old Tribune site's design which relegated banners to the bottom of the home page, where they were seldom seen.

Not for the faint of bandwidth

The new design has been called "TV like," and critics of it are numerous today. Discussion on the Online-News list recently was heated, with many complaining that the site has gone too far and that for many Web users, it's unusable. To be sure, the Tribune site is best viewed on a fast connection to the Internet. I used a dial-up 28.8 modem connection to view it, and found that the splash screens would rotate before the current screen could even load. The site also crashed Netscape when I tried it on two different Macintoshes.

Witt explains that his staff is still experimenting to find the optional rotation timing for the splash screens, to accommodate users on dial-up connections. But more importantly, the site has provided two other interfaces that visitors can use if they don't like the primary interface or it doesn't work for them. One is a more traditional design that looks somewhat like (but not exactly) the previous Tribune site design. The third option is a text-only interface for the site, designed to accommodate those who use text-based browsers like Lynx -- and serve members of the visually handicapped community who access Web sites using software that translates text into spoken words.

The expectation is that most people will use the new design, which is the default when you come to the site. But Witt also thinks that use of the text version of the site will grow over time, largely because of the coming growth of Web browsers on small PDAs (portable digital appliances), which won't be able to accommodate site designs with fancy graphics, Java applications, etc.

So, while some critics of the new Tribune Web design bemoan the bandwidth-hogging characteristics of the new site (and for some low-bandwidth customers, the main site interface is pretty much unusable), I give the Tribune's designers a lot of credit for offering options. Indeed, I think this is the best approach for an Internet environment that is in transition -- with only a lucky few getting fast Internet access while the rest of us wait for the telcos and cable companies to bring broadband access to our communities.

For a long time to come, we will have two classes of users. The Tribune has shown itself willing to accommodate the "lower classes," while not holding back on development of broadband content services for the high end. Witt says that newspaper Web sites' future (and present) involves competing against broadcast companies like CNN, MSNBC and others who have expertise and resources to put video on demand on the Web. His newspaper plans to be ready to compete when there is no longer a public distinction between a newspaper Web site and a TV Web site, as there still is today. The latest redesign is a step in that direction for the Tribune.

The Tribune site can support three separate interfaces easily, since it has now fully implemented a database publishing solution -- Vignette's StoryServer. The site's managers create templates for the alternative interfaces, then publish content to all three interfaces. Witt says the various parts of the site have been moving gradually to the system over the last several months, and the final redesign launch represents the final implementation of the database publishing system.

Unpopular now; will it be tomorrow?

Witt concedes that early feedback on his message boards has been overwhelmingly negative -- though that wasn't unexpected. Consumers seldom like change to a familiar product, and the Tribune site underwent a drastic makeover. The negative reaction "is not terribly alarming to us," Witt says, though complaints are taken seriously and the site will be tweaked with this feedback in mind.

Witt's colleagues gathered last week in Seattle also had some strong opinions. "I know that a lot of them were distressed and dismayed" by what we did, he says, particularly in light of the industry's overwhelming praise of the Tribune site in its old form. Witt says that when he went to the podium to accept his site's third EPpy award -- for best overall online newspaper site by a large-circulation paper -- he heard a few hisses from the audience when he made a remark about destroying the site that won so much acclaim.

You may think you hate the new design today, Witt says, but let's wait and see what you think of it in another year.

(In my next column, we'll take a look at the Christian Science Monitor's approach to its Web site redesign.)

Contact: Howard Witt, hwitt@tribune.com