



Stanford eCorner

Focus Content on User Needs

Jennifer Pahlka, *Code for America*

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Jennifer Pahlka, founder and executive director of Code for America, discusses the classic problem of a government entity presenting users with content organized around its own needs, rather than those of the public. Pahlka also calls for redefining civic involvement, inviting technologists to help agencies with outdated and cumbersome platforms.



Transcript

And in Honolulu, our city partners there were asking us really to fix their website which was tens of thousands of pages of content backed by no CMS and that was not something that three folks could do in the space of one year realistically which is the timeframe of our fellowship. So they kind of kept saying, I am sorry, that's not something we can do, let's find another project. But both the residents of Honolulu and the people in the city hall kept saying, please, please, please, fix our website. So they said, let's start with the problem. This was the website at the time, it's a pretty classic government website, it starts up in the corner with government, agencies and departments online services and the big chunk in the middle is dedicated to news releases. So we call this like a very typical - this is what government wants to tell you. It doesn't have a lot of relationship to what you need from government but it's what we want to tell you. So they said, okay. If we care about what the users actually need, let's look at the search logs and they went in there and said, what are the top terms - turns out the top searched term was driver's licenses which is not an anomaly, very often Americans do not understand which level of government does which function. But in this case, Honolulu actually does handle driver's licenses for the state of Hawaii.

So they said okay, great, let's put that in there. If you type driver's license into the search box at Honolulu.gov, you will get a page that looks like this, there's actually about a dozen pages that look like this. You will click through one of these and you will get another page that looks like this. And this is something that tells you that expired driver's licenses of a member of any component of the United States Armed Forces who is on active federal service gets an extra 30 days, it's stuff like that, dozens and dozens of pages that look like this that do not actually tell you how to get a driver's license. And so they decided that what they could do is just for us to show what's possible and they borrowed from that gov.uk site I showed you earlier, a very basic search interface and they said, look, let's not port all that content onto a new CMS, that's a fool's errand, but let's create our new content. If you type driver's license into this Honolulu Answers interface, you will get something like this if you click that second link, you will get a page that says, how do I get a driver's license. I need to go here, I need to bring these things, I need to take an eye test, I need to pay a fee and here's how I schedule my test. Boom, done. This is the content that people are looking for and this is not, as you can see, a technology problem, it's a content problem but the technology is a part of it. But they knew at that point that there were still those tens of thousands of pages of content that they weren't going to tackle and tens of thousands - maybe not - thousands of needs that the residents of Hawaii had that were not being met by the top 10 search terms that they created great content for.

So I assume everyone here has been to a hackathon, has anybody here before been to a writathon? Yes. Not fair, Tim, we know that. I believe that the writathon that the Code for America fellows held in Honolulu was one of the first ever, I now hear about them around the country but what they did was they took the questions implied by the next 70 search terms - 70 most frequent search terms on the site. And they put them up on a wall in a co-working space, near city hall on a Saturday afternoon and they invited the people that they had met through their research both people in city government and just concerned

citizens and about 60 people showed up. And they spent the day writing in clear, simple, human language the answers to those 60 questions. They would edit each other's work and they would check all of their work with the folks in city hall to make sure they weren't saying anything technically inaccurate. And at the end of the day, they had questions to definitely the top of a long tail curve of what people were coming to Honolulu.gov asking. And it was clear and simple that in a way that their other fellow Honolulu residents could understand and most importantly, they had an amazing time. They actually had a party and a party with the mayor coming by and celebrating is not what most people think of when they think of government technology. And one of the real lessons that we learned there which Dr.

Selig alluded to in my - speaking of my TED Talk is that we have come to the understanding that there are so many concrete ways now that we need to redefine participation in government. It's not just about having a voice in an issue. There are so many voices. It's about offering your hands to actually fix the problem. And I think we are at the verge of being able to say there is no excuse for complaining we can create ways that we, the people, can fix these problems.