

Interactive Web sites draw minds, shape public perception

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The interactive look and feel of a corporate website could help shape positive perceptions about the organization if the site includes a likeable design and features that engage the target audience, especially job seekers, according to media researchers.

S. Shyam Sundar, professor of film, video and media studies at Penn State, and Jamie Guillory, formerly an undergraduate student at Penn State, are trying to understand how interactivity in websites influences the public perception of an organization. In previous studies of websites of political candidates, Sundar had found that the candidates were rated more positively if their site had some interactive features, even though the sites had no new content, and the candidates held the same policy positions. But too much interactivity tends to turn off people.

"Websites with low to medium levels of interactivity create positive perceptions but for medium to high interactivity, it actually falls down," said Sundar. "In general, too much interactivity is not desirable, and may lead to information overload."

Whatever effects, positive or negative, on a site, interactivity acts as a volume knob that boosts the effect, he explained, noting, "Just through the presence of such features, people attribute meaning to the content or the nature of the site."

The Penn State researchers wanted to see if the same effect holds true even if the people viewing the website are highly engaged, or whether

they form their opinions based on bells and whistles on a website only when they do not know enough about a topic.

In the current study, 116 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of seven websites representing low, medium, and high levels of interactivity. The students were specifically assigned to review the career section of these organizations because these sites require a higher level of involvement.

Features on these sites ranged from enabling a person to click on a link for job inquiries, follow a link for information on a specific job, submit an online application and view video footage of the company and its employees.

Students then answered a questionnaire on their perceptions of an organization based on their experience with its website. The study results show that there is a significant positive relationship between the level of interactivity on a career website and job seekers' perception of that organization.

"We found that college students looking for a job are more likely to apply to companies that have interactive websites with bells and whistles," said Sundar, who presented his findings today (May 25) at the 58th annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Montreal. "But the students use these features to make a logical connection."

The work received a Top Paper award from the association's Public Relations division.

"We found that both liking and involvement are significant mediators such that people who saw a high interactive website liked it more, and they also got involved as a result of liking it more," he added.

The findings may have important implications for organizations. For instance, by simply tweaking the features on the website and without changing any of the content, a company could project a positive image to its targeted demographic.

In other words, the website of an organization could feature an optimal amount of interactivity specifically tailored to its target audience, and thereby control the impressions that people form of that organization.

But Sundar also cautions against being taken in by fancy websites that promise much and deliver little.

"We have uncovered a psychological phenomena here, that is the more interactive some thing is, more people -- especially college students -- are likely to buy into whatever is being advocated," said Sundar, who is also a founder of the Penn State Media Effects Research Laboratory. "We are trying to warn them against that potential danger."

Researchers say the next step is to figure out all the different meanings people are attaching when they are faced with new responsive features.

"Interactivity is multi-faceted in terms of the meanings it communicates. It is not just about interaction alone," added Sundar.

Source: Penn State

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