

CHAPTER EIGHT | RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The recommendations provided in this chapter are result of my own research and perceived successes in the web design process. Therefore, they are urban North American and English based experiences that may or may not be suitable for all web design projects. Regardless, the goal of these recommendations is to continue to expand the web design workflow in a manner that promotes the collaborative creation of websites sustainable for small scale nonprofits desiring greater technological autonomy.

FOR WEB DESIGNERS AND NONPROFITS

RECOMMENDATION #1: UTILIZE DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

I will first recommend the use of design ethnography by web designers with nonprofit organizations. Specifically, the use of participant observation either by serving as a volunteer, being hired in-house or simply conducting work in the same office as the nonprofit organization. For the purpose of making recommendations on web design practices, I will assume a small staff, freelance web designer or volunteer. Below I have listed eight main reasons for using design ethnography:

- 1. Nonprofits are strapped for time.** – Participant observation allows the web designer to be part of the organization and thus part of the natural flow of the nonprofit's daily routine. This reduces the time necessary to travel to separate interviews, partake in participatory exercises meant to recreate natural thought processes (i.e. card sorting) or answer email and phone messages.

2. **Content can be created through conversation.** – A major complaint of web designers is that they are always waiting on content. While the majority of content needs to be written by the nonprofit, there are instances where the content can be written collaboratively as a semi-structured interview. For example, in the case of Druid Cycles, as Thor's first language is German, we sat down together, myself at the computer asking questions and taking notes to learn more about the history and goals of the organization. We then collaboratively turned those notes into cohesive paragraphs for the website. This allowed me to learn about the organization and Druid Cycles to get the content done and ready to go.
3. **Trust is built.** – This is what participant observation is about. Coexistence in a daily routine allows the web designer to experience the trials and tribulations of the nonprofit, reinforcing the web designer's role as a temporary member of the organization, rather than an outsider providing a service. This trust and comfort can also increase the likelihood of members frankly sharing their thoughts and desires for the website at an earlier stage, reducing late-term revisions. As an example, I was able to find out through a seemingly unrelated conversation that a member of Pedal Power was poet and desired a space on the site for various bicycle related poetry.
4. **As trust is built, investment is increased.** – By partaking in the daily activities of the nonprofit and using the office space of the organization to work on the website, the web designer can become more invested in the cause of the organization. In doing so, the designer is more apt to produce higher quality work that reaches the organizations' audience and stay motivated through working for a positive cause. This also goes for the nonprofit, who if has more contact with the web designer and its creation, will be more comfortable and invested in taking on maintenance tasks to sustain the website after project completion.

5. **Structure is seen.** - One of the more important results of participant observation is learning about the nonprofit's organizational structure. It is not possible create a website that will survive after the web designer is finished without knowing how an organization works and which people and structures will support its maintenance. It is not the place of the web designer to undermine current staff roles, but to figure out to whom, where and at what level tasks may be given that are positive additions to the organization.
6. **Workflow becomes transparent.** - Working in the same office of the nonprofit organization opens the workflow of the web designer, exposing the positive aspects of the process as well as the struggles normally hidden from view. In addition to design documentation and staging areas, this helps everyone to stay on the same page, knowing the current phase of the web designer's workflow. By letting the organization see that the building of a website is not as straightforward at all times, lessens the organization's view that you are an untouchable expert that cannot be questioned.
7. **The end-user is met.** - Depending on the particular nonprofit, working in-house with the organization allows the web designer to physically meet and connect with the site's end-user. In the case of Druid Cycles I was able to speak to every customer who walked into the shop and chat with them about all things cycling related. Similarly for Pedal Power, just being at the cycling club events allowed me to converse with all participants. If the point of user-experience is to design with the end-user in mind, then this aspect of participant observation is essential. It is also relevant to note, that learning about the goals of the organization or having preexisting interests (such as cycling for myself) greatly helps this along. However, it can also be a tool to learn more about what the nonprofit is all about.

- 8. Client desires versus end-user needs.** Design ethnography can help nonprofit clients understand what their end-user needs. Oftentimes, clients will have a series of functional or design requests that satisfy more clearly desires or personal tastes from within the organization, rather than based on what their audience may react positively to. Design ethnography provides both the nonprofit and web designer the research to back up any major decisions in aesthetics or functionality.

Challenges in defining one's role as a web designer

A potential major issue associated with design ethnography, and participant observation in particular, is keeping clear one's tasks within the nonprofit organization. It is necessary to decide in the beginning whether participant observation will include any and all duties that need to be taken on within the organization and if this responsibility will extend throughout the entire web design process or only until web development commences. Noting that the development of the website can also be considered a participant observation experience in itself and can be a natural progression from initial days spent simply learning about how the organization functions.

If this is not decided on prior to starting a project, the web designer can often be assigned tasks that deviate from aspects of the web design process that require concentration. In the web design industry, the increase of duties outside those defined in the website proposal, without proper adjustment in resources or time, is called *scope creep*. I myself attempted to delineate my tasks, allowing duties of all kinds while physically with the nonprofit and requesting time outside be dedicated to my studies and development of the website only. However, one nonprofit continued to make various technology requests at all times, increasing my workload to an uncomfortable level.

On the 30th of August, amidst the peak of thesis writing stress, I received a phone call, text and email requesting my creative input on website updates that would promote new features of the organization. Having taught the organization how to update the site and already enlisted a new technology volunteer for them, I

was confused by this call. I realized that my previous resignations to extra tasks when I had more time had undermined what I had stated in the web design proposal. While I enjoyed volunteering with the nonprofit immensely, I should have kept more strictly to our guidelines in order to ensure I could not be depended upon after a certain date, thus also jumpstarting them on their own website maintenance.

RECOMMENDATION #2: PRACTICE AGILE DEVELOPMENT AND UX WORKFLOW

In order to accommodate design ethnography into the web design workflow, it is helpful to consider using practices within agile development and UX for the following reasons:

1. **Agile development means flexibility.** – If the web designer is able to work in the office of the nonprofit, designing and developing in quicker and shorter iterations can be particularly successful as the nonprofit is readily available for quick approvals of minor, yet important changes. Most people are better able to envision needs for their website upon seeing it develop, especially those lacking previous technology experience, thus being able to allow for a greater number of revisions can result in a more successful website.
2. **UX reminds you who the website is for.** – User-experience design is about designing for the end-user and following this workflow is a constant reminder of that fact, presupposing the need for user research such as design ethnography. This is doubly important for nonprofit clients, as their end-user is the recipient of the nonprofit's efforts and the ultimate representation of their success. UX also helps one remember to keep the client informed at all times and ensure that access to website resources are readily available for view.

RECOMMENDATION #3: USE WORDPRESS

Wordpress' free core software allows web designers to practice the above design ethnography, agile development and UX workflow more easily due to decreased

time in development and greater ease in alterations; allowing web designers to concentrate on the creation of quality design and content most suited for the end-user. Further advantages are:

1. **Installation and set-up is simple.** - While the Wordpress.org setup most often takes a bit more than 5 minutes (Wordpress' supposed claim to fame), it is certainly a simple process and gets more fluid each time. In fact, many hosts offer their own one-click installation that also sets up your MySQL database if desired.
2. **The Wordpress community.** - The community surrounding Wordpress is extremely active. You may find physical meet up events, a variety of email lists, forums and a slew of online resources¹. Many members of the community are ready to help you out, whether it is for simple fixes or bug checking a newly developed plugin.
3. **Design and development costs are decreased.** - In addition to the core files, the amount of free themes, plugins and widgets available for Wordpress make the web designer less dependent on external sources to build a single website, thus saving the nonprofit and the designer time and money.
4. **Free themes.** - Not only are the themes freely available, but many offer customization options for a website tailored toward the nonprofit organization. This provides an opportunity for the nonprofit to not hire a web designer at all and learning the software alone, or hire the web designer just for setup and education, reducing overall costs.
5. **It is free software.** - Not only is it a good thing to support free software for its ideals, the designer now has a repository of resources at their finger tips that can be modified to fit the needs of the nonprofit. Without this nonprofits would not only have to spend a major portion of their budget on purchasing the software, but also on any added functionality or updates.

¹ Twitter's search features has proven to be incredibly good for Wordpress fixes.

6. **It can be taught.** - Because it is easy to set up Wordpress, designers can create practice environments for their nonprofit clients, allowing them to become comfortable with the software before handing over the actual website. As a result of the Wordpress community there are also a number of tutorials that can be used to help the nonprofit learn to use the software.
7. **Wordpress can be a common language:** Learning to use Wordpress requires a vocabulary that can be learned by both the web designer and nonprofit, thus a language defined by neither side.
8. **The GUI.** - The Wordpress CMS allows for nonprofits to update a website without looking at the code and thus not having to call (and pay) their web designer every time an update is needed. Coding languages are difficult to learn and just like any language there are cultural constructs that surround them. So, learning basic HTML or CSS is not a large help if one is to make any significant changes to the site. Wordpress however, through its GUI can provide a number of usability cues that appeal to people's natural inclinations in computer usage, rather than knowing exactly "where to do what", in a mess of code and files. As a web designer it is also nice to be able to make minor changes through the admin quickly and simply.

Wordpress Negatives

Negatively, Wordpress is susceptible to hacking if one does not keep on their updates for both the core files and the plugins. If a nonprofit does not know how to update or are inconsistent, sporadic updates can often break the system. This becomes a matter of education by the web designer to the nonprofit client or an understanding that the web designer will take care of such issues.

FOR THE WORDPRESS COMMUNITY

Here, I would like to propose two suggestions to the Wordpress community that can be accomplished by people with and without development experience.

RECOMMENDATION #1: DIRECTED LESSONS

What I propose could be done by members of the Wordpress community who are interested in nonprofit use of technology, is under *Wordpress Lessons*² in the Codex, add lessons directly related to specific groups, such as nonprofits. Many of the processes will be the same for those just beginning, but seeing all documentation for Wordpress in the nonprofit sector in one place, rather than dispersed throughout the Wordpress codex, would allow nonprofits to better understand the components they need and conceptualize the process of developing a website. It would also be beneficial to corroborate these lessons with information on Wordpress.TV, as more tutorials are added for various groups who utilize Wordpress.

RECOMMENDATION #2: CRM FUNCTIONALITY

One option not fully supported in Wordpress at the moment is a well done customer relationship management tool (CRM) which allows nonprofits to create mailing lists for donation campaigns or organize volunteers and other community services. While certain plugins are available for specific tasks, a CRM requires more intensive site integration. The creation of this tool or compatibility with existing CRMs such as CIVICRM³ needs to be accomplished at one stage by those with the necessary coding abilities.

FOR DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHERS

As a result of the interdisciplinary background of many design ethnographers, the style of ethnography and the methods within it may vary, but again I will again recommend here the use of participant observation for reasons already outlined above and include a few aspects of my personal process that made utilization of design ethnography more successful.

RECOMMENDATION #1: PUBLIC FIELD NOTES

² http://codex.wordpress.org/WordPress_Lessons

³³ <http://civicrm.org/>

My personal process required taking ample notes on paper during an event, composing a narrative account upon arriving home to my computer and following the next morning with reorganization of the narrative and notes into a readable format to be posted on my field note blog⁴. Initial attempts were quite time consuming, but as many things, improved with time. This three step process proved to be incredibly useful in the long term, as my memory of events was improved, forcing me to organize my thoughts while making connections. Moreover, the tagging, categorization and search features in Wordpress allowed for greater manipulation and organization of my data as a whole. Similar to anthropological coding, tagging allows the user in Wordpress to define their own keywords for the content of each post. These tags can then be seen as a *tag cloud*⁵, which is a listing of the keywords in different font sizes to show their popularity of use in the side bar of a website. Both myself and the website users are able to click on these tags to filter blogs posts to view only the one that are tagged with that particular word. Categories work in the same way, but are used for more general classifications, same as in everyday use. For example, my own field note blog has such categories as *Nonprofit-Druid Cycles*, *Nonprofit-Pedal Power*, *Transcriptions* and *Anthrodesign*.

Furthermore, online field notes provide the option for nonprofits to verify whether or not what you are picking up on is correct. Integrating this feedback helps to support client involvement and provides a forum for people more comfortable commenting online than in person⁶. These notes can also be reviewed by colleagues, capable of adding or clarifying information based on their own experiences.

Issues in field note blogging

Blogging field notes is a time consuming process with a greater occurrence of self editing due to knowledge of one's writing being public. As described above,

⁴ <http://www.appliedanthrodesign.com/blog/>

⁵ For example on website sidebar: <http://www.appliedanthrodesign.com/research/> and scroll toward bottom.

⁶ See Chapter 7 for more in-depth discussion.

the longer process was incredibly useful, but required a definite commitment after each evening's events of writing and revision. In terms of self-editing, while the nature of my work did not make for major concerns surrounding anonymity and safety of my interview participants (or nothing that could not be solved with the use of pseudonyms) I felt that I was limited in unabashedly sharing every thought and feeling I had about the day. In common anthropological practice, field notes are often deeply personal accounts that are kept aside from "professional" renditions of their work never seen by another person. Knowing my participants would be reading the post, did affect my writing and therefore there was not room to pass much judgment on the character and nature of the event, unless it was extremely positive. The single post that did contain my doubts in my research (see Chapter 4) was not met with open arms, and caused a minor dispute (while a beneficial experience in the long term). Such issues are of course dealt with better in person and noted according to their resolution and relevance, not as medium for initial discussion in the context of design ethnography.

RECOMMENDATION #2: RESEARCH ETHNOGRAPHIES OUTSIDE OF DESIGN

The interdisciplinary background of design ethnographers makes field work methods infinitely variable. Therefore, I will only speak to my experiences which have been deeply influence by my studies in social anthropology prior to being involved in web design. It has been essential for me to know the constraints and possibilities of technology in order to make proper recommendations, however the resolution of issues central to technology access must be looked through a wider worldview. As a result of my education in varied social systems and population groups across the globe, as opposed to populations looked at only through the lens of technology development, it was easier to perceive the nonprofit as its own entity rather than looking at all happenings in terms of what they meant for the development of the website. Therefore I suggest the reading of ethnographies outside the field of design ethnography (possibly on topics related to the client-nonprofit organization) to understand how anthropologists approach topics with different research

methods and to what level they are successful, the necessity of reflexivity and as a means of inspiration. Ethnographies can also provide important theoretical backdrops in which to frame ethnographic research, rather than directly reporting observations and experiences that result in intuition based design decisions. As stated by Macaulay et al.:

Whilst a good ethnographer's intuitive sense of what is interesting may guide them in the field, even the inevitably overwhelmed novice ethnographer can gain from the opportunity to acquire insight through the application of activity theoretical concepts, if for no other reason that in doing so the ethnographer is forced to actively reflect on their role in constituting the object of study. [2000: 56]

Issues in design ethnography

Although, the issue below is less problematic when dealing with a web design process actively sought by nonprofits themselves, in certain circumstances the successful utilization of technology can make design ethnographers nervous due to the changes the new technology will enact on a particular population group (Macaulay et.al. 2000: 39). However design ethnography has broadened the idea of those involved in the production of design artifacts and taught the importance of the end-user in their research (see Chapter 6). Lucy Suchman states that, "Developers must give up control over technology design (which is in any case illusory), and see themselves instead as entering into an extended set of working relations, of contest, and alliances" (2002:142). If those involved in the technology industry are not capable of being reflexive and listening to the end-user, they risk treating users as an anthropological other, reopening the politics of authoritative knowledge, similar to the discussions in development anthropology (Escobar 1991).

CONCLUSION

The recommendations provided in this chapter are meant to serve as initial guidelines for future web design projects in the nonprofit sector. I realize there are further restrictions that may limit the use of the above recommendations; particularly time and money for both the web designer and nonprofit, but

partial attempts and greater aspirations can still be a positive move forward. However, hopefully the recommendations have provided the base actants required to tailor their use to specific relationships, environments and organizations. One should also be reminded that it is the duty of both the web designer and nonprofit to utilize UX and design ethnography in a way that builds collaborative relationships that will satisfies all desired requirements in a web design project.