Webb's web

Converting your tries

There's a great tendency to ignore the basics when you're developing sites and systems for the Web. Sure, we should follow the standard practices and try something and if it doesn't work, then we learn from the experience and try something else — that's the way it goes. But Liana Evans wrote in Search Engine Watch (**http://searchenginewatch.com/3634014**) that it's a very good idea to set goals for activities like this. Because if you don't know where you want to go, how do you know if you got there or not?

The worth of words

Here's a new (but quite useful) site to while the time away. Wordnik (**http://www.wordnik.com/**) is a dictionary that's been built from a few existing sources (presumably out of copyright) and added to by contributors. It contains more than 1.7 million words so far. You'll find not only the meaning of the word that you're looking for, but there are examples of its use — again from a number of sources and from contributors. But here's the fun bit: it tells you how many times a particular word has been searched for. So, with a bit of diligent application and an eye for unusual words, you might just be successful in finding one that nobody else has thought to look for yet.

Lessons in emergency communications

Anyone interested at all in Web communications can learn a lot from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission at **http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/** It's only part-way through, of course, but from the submissions and the transcript of the hearings that have been published online, there's a lot to learn. One that caught my eye was the transcript of proceedings on 16 June, and reports from the beginning of July show that the Commission is promoting the idea that there should be just one website giving fire updates instead of two. With hindsight, you can't see why that didn't happen earlier; after all, the reports on the radio (imperfect though they may have been) did not differentiate between fires on private property and Crown Lands, as the sites for the CFA and the DSE seem to have done. Back to the Commission site: you can also search the submissions by keyword, and that shows that there are some people quite anxious to promote their particular causes — not always related to the bushfires.

Web 2.0 and organisational requirements

There have been a few interesting comments recently about how web 2.0 services can have trouble meeting the sort of requirements that systems in most organisations must conform to, particularly relating to records management activities. One place where you'll find these discussions is in the series of podcasts produced by Northumbria University at **http://nuweb.northumbria.ac.uk/ceis_podcasts/index.php** (although they really do need to do something about the recording volume). Another source is that darling of the eGovistas, the Obama administration. It seems that initiatives such as the US Paperwork Reduction Act sit quite uneasily with Government 2.0 concepts. Read about it at **http://fcw.com/Articles/2009/06/17/Web-Web-tools-and-regs.aspx**

Government 2.0: theory and practice

I wrote in my last column about Kate Lundy's experiments with new types of conferences, using Web 2.0 technology and different concepts in conference organisation. In June she had the second in the series of Public Sphere events (**http://tinyurl.com/mhmndj**), with this one focussed on Government 2.0 topics. She was helped on this occasion by Minister for Finance and Deregulation Lindsay Tanner announcing the establishment of a Government 2.0 Taskforce (**http://www.gov2.net.au**) This announcement was greeted with enthusiasm by the audience, but there were a couple of us who wondered whether this was too cautious by half: the rest of the world is forging ahead with interesting sites (like the US Government's Free Data Repository **http://www.data.gov**) but we're going quite softly softly.

The Public Sphere itself left quite a lot to be desired in my opinion, not least because of its emphasis on Twitter and live blogging. It doesn't really disturb me if my neighbour has his head down all day, but at least he could turn the audible feedback option of his laptop off for the duration. And the tweets from within the venue or out in the Twitterverse being displayed on the big screen at the front of the room were often banal, offensive, or redundant. I'm told that this is the way of the future, but I do think that there's plenty to learn — as long as the organisers can get over their love affair with the technology.

But feel free to make up your own mind about the worth of the event by looking at Kate Lundy's site.

Getting started

You might think that there'd be no difficulty in finding pointers to good resources for learning about web design and similar topics. After all, it's all on the web, isn't it? Well, it is and it isn't. It's not too hard to do a search and find a site that appears to have lots of useful information, but the difficulty is getting an assessment of how good or useful it is. I needed something like this recently for the people I work with who are faced with the task of setting up and maintaining a site, usually with no formal training. So I happened across the WaSP InterAct site (**http://interact.webstandards.org/curriculum/**) and was quite impressed. It's very well organised and you can drill down from the overall curriculum through learning modules to details of subject outlines, assignments and resources. You could do a lot worse.

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Don't forget to visit my blog
http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog