

The Need for Effective Visual Communication:
How Website Design Can Further
the Success of the Cal Poly Women's Lacrosse Team

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Abstract

This paper argues that an efficient and successfully built website is crucial to the future success of college sports websites. By focusing on the Cal Poly Women's Lacrosse team and its website, visual communication research gives insight into what works and what does not. The fundamental and design elements examined include: text elements, site navigation, accessible links, presence of news, communication and graphics (visual design). These are the elements that promote success and efficiency. Compared to other websites built and maintained by teams in the women's lacrosse league, Cal Poly's lacks foundational website material. General website research proves this and an interview with Will Oakley, website designer for Laxteams.net does as well. Understanding the importance of good web design is the first step in this program's success online. The conclusion include massive reconstruction and maintenance of the lacrosse website.

Keywords: Cal Poly, Women's Lacrosse, website design, success and efficiency in visual communication.

Introduction

Since the start of the WDIA (Women's Division Intercollegiate Associates) in 2001, the Cal Poly Women's lacrosse program has won seven of the last ten titles. The team has produced WDIA record holders, a hand-full of All-Tournament awards and several All-American awards. This season's goal: be undefeated in league, win the regional tournament, be a top seed at Nationals and win their eighth national title. The women's lacrosse team carries awards, trophies and recognition that are an honor to their program, however since they are not a Cal Poly NCAA sport, they don't have a place to show them off. This season, the team traveled to Scottsdale, AZ for the national tournament and also planned a trip to Colorado in March to play rivals, University of Colorado and Colorado State University. Throughout the season, the team hoped to fundraise nearly \$4,500 for their season. The women's lacrosse team's success has brought Cal Poly a lot of recognition in the lacrosse world, which has caused a significant amount of interest in the program. This year at the National tournament, Cal Poly was the team to watch, even though they were seeded fifth going into the tournament. David Ely, who covered the tournament, praised the Cal Poly lacrosse team, saying, "Who looks to be the prime dark horse candidate in this week's US Lacrosse WDIA National Championship, presented by Harrow Sports, in Scottsdale, Ariz.? Signs point to No. 5 seed Cal Poly, which once won seven straight WDIA national championships before falling the last two years" (Ely, 2010).

With a new coaching staff, the women's lacrosse team has a bright future ahead, however with so much rising interest, fans and potential recruits, other teams and parents need a place to go for information. The potential of the Internet as a vital part of building up this nationally recognized sports team is promising. According to Matthew T. Brown, assistant professor in the

Sports Administration and Facility Management Program at Ohio University, “For sports organizations, the web provides access to a desirable target market that justifies establishing an online presence,” (Brown 2003). Websites are catalysts for information in our world today and are becoming increasingly popular among sports fans. At the end of 2002, the number of American adults online totaled 114 million, or 61 percent of the population (Brown, 2003). The potential for a vast sports audience is promising with the amount of people that currently use the Web. The Internet combines accessibility, interactivity, speed and multimedia content to propel change in the delivery of mediated sports (Raney and Bryant, 2006). Sports websites are becoming much more than just information pages as well. Scott Rosner and Kenneth Shropshire, co-authors of *The Business of Sports* argue that “the use of the web as a medium of communication is this likely to extend beyond providing basic club information into providing users with a multimedia experience,” (Rosner and Shropshire, 2004). With Cal Poly’s remarkable history and promising future, what visual communication elements qualify a lacrosse website as both efficient and successful? This paper will argue that not only is a successful website crucial to the future development of the Cal Poly lacrosse program, but also that the most structurally important elements of a website are text, user experience/navigation, communication, links and graphic elements.

Aside from looking at the aesthetics of web design, it is also crucial to base this research question on a specific foundation of theory. In exploring the idea of the Internet and the spread of connectivity, it is only appropriate to approach this topic from the theory of “Uses and Gratification.” The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory is most commonly used to understand mass media in society and its affect on consumers. More specifically the U&G theory is used to

describe, “how people actively seek out specific media to produce a specific gratification” (West and Turner, 2005). This theory applies directly to the Internet and the ability of a consumer to gratify himself/herself with whatever he/she desires. In this case, a person would be actively and purposefully seeking out a sports website with a motivation to gain sports-related knowledge. A lacrosse website falls into the same category, which helps apply the U&G theory. Since lacrosse is such a niche sport, a person is coming to the website with the intention of gratifying themselves with knowledge on the Cal Poly women’s team, their game schedule perhaps, or even just learning about lacrosse in general. By understanding and applying this theory it will give a clearer picture on the intentions of a user interested in a lacrosse website.

It is not only important to have a theoretical foundation, but also important to know the history of sports on the Internet. In the beginning, sports were just another search genre, however by the first decade of the twenty-first century the biggest sports websites were ESPN.com, Yahoo! Sports, AOL Sports, SI.com and Sportsline.com, each recording over a million different visitors each week (Muller, 2009). Despite the amount of growing interest in sports websites, it obvious that the fan base of Cal Poly women’s lacrosse does not register close to the size of the fan base for ESPN.com or SI.com. These sites get millions of hits per day; however these mega-sport websites provide evidence that people are interested in sports websites and are drawn to certain elements in them. For example, in 2001, only 359,000 people accessed the official Super Bowl website, compared to the 1.4 million website visitors for the 2003 Super Bowl (Muller, 2009). As the Internet has exploded in popularity over the last few years, people accessing sports websites has grown just as much, if not more.

Cal Poly women's lacrosse has a basic website (cplacrosse.com) that only provides standard information: such as the team rosters, the schedule and email contact information. In the past the website has not been a major part of the program and therefore is often neglected and outdated. However, with the rise of interest in the program, a functioning and effective website is necessary for Cal Poly lacrosse. In 2006, a case study that examined how college athletes determine which college to commit to, 427 surveys revealed that most college sports websites could provide content needed to influence college choice (Finley, 2006). Coaches were also encouraged to assess if their website accurately displays the strength of their program. If the team is looking for future recruit, a functional (easily navigated) website could provide help with their decision. According to Finley's standards, the Cal Poly lacrosse website does not accurately display the strength and potential of its program. In a technologically based culture, the Cal Poly lacrosse program should be taking full advantage of the opportunities on the web. For example, since fundraising is such a large part of their program during season, their website should be linked into online donations. In comparison to other lacrosse websites in their league (the WDIA) Cal Poly lacks significantly in all structural elements. The site is outdated; the first example being that for the majority of the season the picture of the team on the homepage was from three years ago. According to Greg Muller, managing director of web design and development at Bullseye states that

Even the most visually impressive, innovative and over-the-top websites usually fail for one main reason: they rarely meet the needs of their users. Ultimately, if the user doesn't see the value in a website, finds it hard to navigate, becomes confused with content or

just generally dislikes the color palette, they'll switch off and, chances are, go somewhere else. On average, users take less than a third of a second to judge a website (Muller 2009).

Judging by the standard that Muller sets, web design and development are crucial to the functionality of a website and the user experience. This also applies directly to sports websites as well.

Review of Literature

I have played lacrosse for Cal Poly for the all four years of my college experience. I am also very passionate about new media, with a focus on how to effectively relay messages through visual media. So combining my two interests, I would like to use our lacrosse website as a poor example of a college sport website and therefore examine how to construct a more efficient and successful college sports website. There are many different important elements to building an efficient website and I would like to focus on college sports. This will be a theory and research based paper, because I need expert's information and case studies to back up my own personal thought and interpretation. Through the research I gather I want to assess the website from a critical angle, compare it to other similar websites, discuss the social need for change and why it is important to our program.

Websites are the first place people go to find information, so I want to research and examine past case studies and journals to determine the relationship between website viewers and the website. With the rise of the Internet we have become a visually oriented culture. Via websites, we communicate information, images and networking. Journalists today are

responsible for knowing how to visually communicate with their audience. I hope to achieve a research based website plan that will effectively communicate with the intended audience. I will start with that as my general research and then narrow it down to focus on a couple of key elements in building a website today. From there I will use the research I have found to compare and contrast other college lacrosse websites, so that I can combine my own research to secondary research to build the most efficient website for our program.

College Sports and the Internet/Websites

The use of the Internet in connection to college sports has been addressed through magazine articles (Finley, 2006, Whiteside, 2009), journals (Brown, 2003) and books (Rosner and Shropshire 2004, Raney and Bryant, 2006). An article about a cross-country team's website lends advice on elements of a sports website, citing the importance of detailed biographies of coaches and players, team record pages and contact information (Finley, 2006).

As social media is on the rise, it is playing a major role in the sports world. An article was recently written that focused on the idea that college coaches are keeping fans informed and promoting their programs via Twitter. Twitter is the latest trend in social networking (Whiteside, 2009) and has proved to be an effective form of communication between coaches and recruits, coaches and players and coaches and fans.

Scott Rosner and Kenneth Shropshire wrote "The Business of Sport" which has a section that focuses on attracting and monitoring new and existing supporters on your website. They suggest that "One of the best ways to attract users and keep them coming back is to find out what particular segments of supporters want from a website and then to make offers that make that will lead them to revisit" (Rosner and Shropshire, 2004).

For a wider-angle look at sports on the Internet, “The Handbook of Sports and Media: Sports Online, the Newest Player in Mediasport” offers statistics that solidify the fact that sports and the Internet are now extremely interconnected. The growth of the number of people accessing sports websites has grown in a manner parallel to the growth of web content and production (Raney and Bryant, 2006).

Studies show that at the end of 2002, the online adult population reached 114 million Americans, or 61% of U.S. adults (Brown, 2003). In a study about sports marketing on specific sports websites, it concluded, “for sport organizations, the web provides access to a desirable target market that justifies establishing an online presence” (Brown, 2003).

Web Design Elements

There is a plethora of knowledge about website design elements available. Studies and articles show that better designs produce websites that people are instantly attracted to (Muller, 2009). Some research breaks down website design into six basic essentials of creating a professional website (Shaw, 2010).

Navigation is one of the most important elements in web design; it makes finding information easy for the user. Navigation provides movement and flow through a website (Garrett, 2003). Details like navigation cannot go overlooked with web design, and case studies that examine those details are essential for research.

Visual design is the first thing people see, and you can keep people on your website by considering three main components of web design: functional, technical and user interface and visual design (Strauss and Hogan, 2001). In the process of improving a website the architecture of the site is key. One structure provided by a case study breaks the website into categories: site

architecture, page performance, page formatting, text formatting/elements, link formatting/elements and graphic formatting/elements (Ivory and Hearst, 2002). Case studies that provide basic website structure provide an outline for any type of website.

Good websites require finances, however today this is made possible through inexpensive and basic web design (Voltolina, 2009). Research extends from complicated types of designs to the simple do's and don't of web design. A good website is colorful but not garish, don't distract the eye with so much color that visitors ignore the content (Levine, 2002). Design is important for the eye to be drawn in, however, visual design communicates your concept, but does not make your website work (Strauss and Hogan, 2001).

A case study done on the theoretical two-factor model for design and evaluation: satisfiers and dissatisfiers (Zhang and von Dran) states there are two types of design factors: hygiene and motivator. Hygiene factors make a website functional and serviceable and whose absence causes user dissatisfaction, while motivator factors are those that contribute to user satisfaction (Zhang and von Dran). This model influences any type of website; for example, in designing a sports website I would need to determine what the hygiene and motivator factors are. Are there graphics? Is it text heavy? Do they want a game schedule? Do they want to read news about the team? These are questions I will be able to determine on my own with the help of research like this case study.

Web Content and maintaining a Website

Content analysis is vital to determine how to view and respond to content on the web. Web content is the most vital part of a website (Rosen and Purinton, 2004) and that a

combination of text, pictures, graphics, layout, sound and motion all create a solid content package (Rosen and Purinton, 2004).

Studies have been conducted to prove that one of the most effective ways to write for the web is to make things concise and scannable (Morkes and Nielsen, 1997). A survey on web usability discovered that people do not like scrolling through pages, they want text to be short and to the point (Nielsen 1997).

Since the popularity rise of the Internet people have written several books and guides to building and maintaining a website. When considering web content, one needs to consider several questions such as, “How do I maximize the value the site creates?” Or, “How can I better manage changes to the website?” (Friedlein, 2003). Edward Reeve, author of the journal article, “Maintaining Your Website” states that “It is very frustrating to search the Internet only to locate websites that are not current.” In order for effective communication to take place, websites must be both developed and maintained (Reeve, 1998).

Relationship between Websites and Users

At least one study has been done that helps website developers narrow down their target audience and website visitors. Very helpful outlines ask questions such as: what is the purpose of your website? What are your visitor’s needs? How do you prioritize your information? What are the maintenance costs? Specific guides on how to maintain a relationship between websites and users are broad but can be applied to a more specific website, such as college sports.

Methods emphasizing understanding people rather than technology are highlighted in studies that focus on a user-centered design (Garrett, 2003). There are also specific planes of planning, beginning with strategy then scope, structure, skeleton and surface, that help

theoretically base website design (Garrett, 2003). When a user cannot find desired information on the web it is both a frustrating and disappointing experience. Creating a website is all about the user and how he/she relates to the information and design you are creating.

“The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook” focuses on web credibility research and guidelines for design, with an emphasis on website-user relations. The authors, Andrew Sears and Julie Jako, state that, “...several features of a website can erode its credibility as a medium.” This highlights the current thought that design elements, credibility and website-user relations are all reliant upon one another and necessary for success. Website credibility fosters trust between the user and the website, which is a vital part of their relationship (Sears and Jako, 2008).

During a content analysis of the formal features of 496 top websites drawn at random from a sample of the top 5,000 most visited sites determined by 100hot.com, it was discovered that people find the body of the home page very important (Bucy, Lany, Potter and Grabe, 1999). Dynamic elements such as color changing, scrolling text, animated graphics and icons were present in almost a third of the home pages sampled (Bucy, Lany, Potter and Grabe, 1999). Surveys such as this one are key elements in gathering how people view and interpret websites.

There is at least one case study that looks at the user-centered design and usability testing of a website (Corry, Frick and Hansen, 1997). User-centered design is defined by the “philosophy based on the needs and interests of the user, with an emphasis on making products usable and understandable” (Corry Frick and Hansen, 1997). The case study highlights characteristics of a usability test (which may be something I can do as a part of my methodology

in comparing college lacrosse websites), and focus on how they relate to the information.

Similarly, web designers need to be aware that web users are as diverse as the information they are searching; therefore it is important to host a website that is all user-friendly (Want, Hawk and Tenopir).

Methodology

Websites are the first place people go to find information, and today journalists are responsible for knowing how to visually communicate with their audience. With the rise of the Internet we have become a visually oriented culture. Via websites, we communicate information, images and networking. I hope to achieve a research based website plan that will effectively communicate with the intended audience. Therefore, I will research and examine past case studies and journals to determine the relationship between website viewers and the website. I will start with that as my general research and then narrow it down to focus on a couple of key elements in building a website today. There is a plethora of information and opinions about creating a successful website. However, with a topic as broad as website design and development elements, the research has to be narrowed down using various steps. Research will consequently be narrowed to focus on sports websites and what an audience wants in a sports website.

Since there isn't necessarily specific research on what an audience desires in a sports (or lacrosse) website, it will take some primary research. My main interview was with a Will Oakley with LaxTeams.net, the website provider for lacrosse templates. Laxteams.net provides templates for lacrosse teams and also provide guidelines for what to include. I also examined

what research defines as the most successful aspects of web design and then create a coding sheet that goes accordingly. For example, if text elements are a vital part of web design, then text elements will be examined in each lacrosse website. This method was combined with other methods provided by research on how to measure web quality and usability (Ivory and Hearst, 2002). The subject was expanded and researched by adapting a coding style of website analysis to compare and contrast six lacrosse websites. To narrow the research, only websites in Cal Poly's national division, the WDIA (Women's Division Intercollegiate Associates) were analyzed. Cal Poly women's lacrosse currently is part of the ialax.com (Laxteams.net) domain name, so the web analysis included three other women's lacrosse websites from the same host website: University of California at Santa Barbara, University of California at Los Angeles, and Santa Clara University. Since these websites come from the same host provider, templates have both similarities and differences that were examined with the coding sheet. The other three websites are hosted by different providers, and include University of Michigan, Colorado State University and Lindenwood University (Sidearm).

By measuring the effectiveness of these six websites, combining my research findings and gathering valuable information from my interview, I was able to answer my research question effectively.

Research Questions

Consequently, this paper will discuss the following questions:

- 1) What draws people to sports websites?
- 2) What elements are successful on sports websites?
- 3) How do you keep people coming back to your website?

- 4) What defines visual communication?
- 5) What elements make a website as a whole, efficient?
- 6) How do you measure success on a sports website?

Results

In examining the idea that certain visual communication elements qualify a lacrosse website as both successful and efficient, it is first important to clarify some definitions. Visual communication is defined by the text, links, graphic elements and site architecture of a website (Ivory and Hearst, 2002). Including those elements, it is also vital to understand that visual communications is based on the user's relationship with the website. Although these terms are broad, they also set the same standards for sports websites. The words "successful" and "efficient" can also be ambiguous, so it is key to define them in relation to sports websites. Will Oakley, founder of the company Laxteams.net, which is also the website provider for the Cal Poly women's lacrosse website, defines efficient as "a website that quickly shows its users what it does or what it is about, whether through words pictures or some other means." Interestingly, efficient and successful often times depend on one another. "A successful website has a lot to do with its efficiency, but not always. The success of a website is determined by a lot of things, but in general it fills a need that has not been met, provides users with unique content that changes or is updated frequently, or is a substantial improvement on an existing concept," states Oakley. Laxteams.net currently hosts 130 sports websites and around 180 websites on its free version

provider, Freeteams.net. These definitions are crucial in obtaining results while analyzing the website for Cal Poly lacrosse.

The satisfaction of the user’s experience on the website is always the end goal. Satisfied users will spend longer amounts on time on the site, come back to the site or even recommend it to their friends (Zhang and von Dran, 2000). The satisfaction of the user will be determined from the factors that define a sports website as successful and efficient. These elements include: the text elements, the overall design layout (graphics), navigation, and presence of news articles, links and communication.

The architecture of a website is both complex and crucial to the success of the site. Therefore design criteria is important to capitalize on as to avoid website failures commonly found with websites that don’t meet that criteria (Palmer, 2002). One of the most important is the presence of text elements on a website. Elements include: amount of text, the typeface, quality of text and the formatting of text using styles, sizes and boldface (Ivory and Hearst, 2002). As shown in Table 1, out of the seven WDIA lacrosse websites, Cal Poly lacked significant text elements in the design. With text being an important criteria of website design, Cal Poly displays an absence of text and lacks unity in the typeface.

Table 1
The Presence of Text Elements Including Type and Quantity

| TEXT | Absence of Text | Text heavy | Unity of typeface | Use of bold text | Number of typefaces |
|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cal Poly | Yes | No | No | Yes | 4 |
| UCSB | No | Yes | No | No | 3 |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|-----|-----|---|
| UCLA | No | No | Yes | Yes | 3 |
| Santa Clara University | No | No | No | Yes | 2 |
| University of Michigan | No | No | Yes | Yes | 6 |
| Colorado State University | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | 4 |
| Lindenwood University | No | No | Yes | Yes | 3 |

The graphic element in website design layout is another defining factor in the success of a website. In a study conducted with 2,800 users, the “design look” was the by far the most mentioned category (Sears and Jacko, 2008). However, even the most visually stimulating and impressive designs can fail if the needs of the users are not met (Muller 2009). Accordingly it is important to examine the specific needs of sports website users. Understanding the website’s target audience will help when answering the question of what the purpose of the website is and what the site does for users. Besides being aesthetically pleasing, good graphic design can contribute to and support the usability of the website (Strauss and Hogan, 2001). The target audience for the Cal Poly women’s lacrosse website includes: players, fans (friends, fellow Cal Poly students) family member and Cal Poly lacrosse alumni. “The graphic design elements helps the team advertise itself to the site’s visitors and keeps fans, parents and alumni more involved with the team,” says Oakley. If a viewer does not see value in the website, finds it difficult to navigate through, becomes confused with the content or just does not enjoy the color scheme, they are much more likely to leave the site (Muller, 2009).

With a college sports team, the use of the school color and mascot are the first step in utilizing graphics. Cal Poly's lacrosse website does host the school colors of green, black and yellow, as well as the school mascot, the mustang. However, beyond that there are no other colors or graphics. Compared to the other schools, Cal Poly also lacks photographs. As shown in Table 2, the website lacks large photos and most importantly lacks quality photographs. Up until last month the picture of the team on the home page was from 2007; the picture that replaced it is stretched long ways, making the quality terrible. Other than the home page there is only one photo album of 14 pictures taken in 2008. People enjoy pictures and will spend more time on a website with images, especially if the photo displays clear faces (Outing and Ruel, 2006).

For future reference in designing a website, it is often recommended that contrary to the belief that user feedback should shape corrections on a website, tweaks and modifications are much more valuable if they are made before the website is launched (Muller, 2009). Having previous knowledge of what good graphic design should resemble can be very advantageous to a website creator.

Table 2
Presence of Graphic Elements in Design Layout

| GRAPHICS | Colorful Layout | Use of School Colors | Quality Photos | Large Photos | Small Photos | Team Mascot represented | Graphics up-to-date | Youtube |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Cal Poly | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| UCSB | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| UCLA | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Santa Clara University | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| University of Michigan | Yes |
| Colorado State University | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | No |
| Lindenwood University | Yes | No |

The sports section is present in every newspaper and on every news website. It includes both photographs and news/feature stories. This is a good model to use for building a sports specific website. A Cal Poly lacrosse fan wants to see the latest news on the team. This could include game recaps, player profiles and even highlight awards that players win during the season. The last story written on the Cal Poly lacrosse website was from Feb. 7, 2010 and it highlights the team’s first win of the season. Since then it has not been updated, not even when the team went to Nationals and returned with second place. UCSB and Santa Clara, the other two teams that went to Nationals from California regularly posted game recaps and their last post consisted of how both teams did at Nationals. There is a disconnect with the fact that Cal Poly got second place and has no news about it on their website and Santa Clara and UCSB took fifth and sixth place and both had a news article on their last game. As with any news organization, the importance of current and updated news applies to the Cal Poly lacrosse website as well.

As seen in Table 3, the Cal Poly lacrosse website lacks up-to-date news, feature articles and accompanying photographs. Even if they do have an RSS feed, it is not utilized because

there are no current and relative sports news stories going up on the website. Sports websites offer the textual information, data and plethora of images that have made newspapers valuable over the last century (Real, 2006). Therefore it is important to utilize this idea on the lacrosse website. If a viewer came to the website in hopes of finding out the latest news about the Cal Poly women's lacrosse program, they would be immediately disappointed. The news aspect of the website is crucial to its success as a sports website.

Table 3
Presence of Lacrosse Affiliated News

| NEWS | Up-to-date News | RSS feeds | Feature articles | Accompanying photos |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cal Poly | No | Yes | No | No |
| UCSB | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| UCLA | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Santa Clara University | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| University of Michigan | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Colorado State University | No | No | No | No |
| Lindenwood University | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |

Navigation is another vital aspect of website design. It allows users to obtain the information searching for and makes the information easier to find (Palmer, 2002). Navigation mechanisms consist of buttons, drop-down menus, scrollbars, and overall level of difficulty in

finding the desired information (Gehrke and Turban, 1999). As shown in Table 4, comparatively, Cal Poly lacks consistent website navigation simply by the fact that information is classified as “not easy to locate.” Most of the tabs on the left hand sidebar lead the viewers to pages that read “information coming soon.” The purpose of a sports website is to gather information. Whether the viewer is a player, fan, alumni, future recruit or family, all are searching for information. For example, if a player needs to fill out registration forms to play and the page says “information coming” and the link leads you to a dead website, the navigation has failed the viewer. If a website is lacking efficient and user-friendly navigation, the user is more likely to get confused and frustrated and never return to the site (Gehrke and Turban, 1999).

Poor navigation can single-handedly cause a user to give up their search (Spool, 1999). In 2009, a mother of a future recruit contacted the president of the women’s lacrosse team and complained that “she couldn’t find any of the information that she needed on the website.” The fact that someone has taken the time to complain, gives voice to a lack of concise navigation. The sidebar is the most usable aspect of navigation and therefore is deemed a priority. According to the Eye-tracking study, viewers paid the most attention to and focused longer on the sidebars on the left-hand side of the website (Outing and Ruel, 2006). The sidebar is already set up on the left hand side and top left, however it will be a focal point of the reconstruction process.

Table 4
Presence of Simple Site Navigation

| NAVIGATION | Easy to find important information | Cluttered with Ads | Sidebar scroll |
|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Cal Poly | No | No | Yes |
| UCSB | Yes | No | Yes |
| UCLA | Yes | No | Yes |
| Santa Clara University | Yes | No | Yes |
| University of Michigan | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Colorado State University | No | No | No |
| Lindenwood University | No | No | Yes |

Links have become a very valuable asset the connectivity of the Internet; therefore text links are vital to the success of an overall website (Spool 1999). Generally, links are created promote accessibility to other resources in the theme of the website. In this case, links should promote the connection into the lacrosse world. A faulty or “broken” link is often times referred to as “one of the most annoying design faults on the web” (Gehrke and Turban, 1999). Earlier in the year, the website only hosted two links that were accessible; however later in the year it was updated to eight total links. The links themselves are not the only most important feature; the way they are formatted is strategic as well. It is suggested that links that correlate with different colors and are underlined prove the most successful (Ivory and Hearst, 2002). Differentiating and making the links scannable has also proven to be successful with viewers (Nielson and Tahir, 2001). As seen in Table 5, although Cal Poly has eight links they do not use another

distinct color for their links. Another observation about one of Cal Poly's links is that it is not linked to Laxmagazine.com. Lacrosse Magazine is the hub of all lacrosse news, spanning from NCAA to the club level, WDIA; this would be a key link to have on the website. Links are created to ensure simplicity for the viewer. Links do the work for the user. A person interested in the Cal Poly lacrosse program would most likely also desire more general information on the team's league or lacrosse in general. By utilizing links appropriately, the user can be extremely satisfied with the range of information at their fingertips.

Table 5
Presence of Links on Website Including Number of Links and Formatting

| LINKS | Number of Accessible Links | Linked to Laxpower.com | Linked to Laxmagazine.com | Colors used for Links | Up-to-date Links |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cal Poly | 8 | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| UCSB | 12 | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| UCLA | 7 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Santa Clara University | 10 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| University of Michigan | 2 | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Colorado State University | 11 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Lindenwood University | 3 | No | No | Yes | Yes |

The purpose of a website is to communicate some sort of information. No matter what the genre the website falls into, there is always going to be a need for communication elements.

The focus on communication is more narrow with a sports website due to its niche factor. Lacrosse is not the most popular or well-known sport out there, therefore a lacrosse website would fall into the category of a niche market. In that case it is important to examine the communication needs through the lens of another niche market sport. For instance, take cross-country. Peter Finley, a sports manager at Nova Southeastern University in Florida wrote an article on how to build a “recruit-friendly cross country website.” Finley encourages coaches to build websites that make communication between students and coaches both a priority and easy. Also included are tips for creating a successful sports website. An emphasis is put on the importance of detailed player and coach biographies, easy to read race results, archives of the history of the program, awards that players have won over the years and student-athlete testimonials (Finley, 2006). Finley also put an extra emphasis on the fact that after surveying freshman athletes, the majority preferred reading box scores (similar to a spreadsheet layout) than reading headlines of news stories (Finley, 2006).

These elements can be cross-examined with a lacrosse website as well. As shown in Table 6, Cal Poly lacks significant communication elements such as, a history of the team, a newsletter, an extensive photo gallery and team statistics. As previously discussed, the women’s lacrosse program has a rich history of National Titles and All-American awards; it would be strategic to have an archive on the website. Up until two months ago the website did not host a single biography of the current players, however that was recently updated with a photo for the first time ever. Individual bios are necessary on any sports website and have proven to be successful with users (Finley, 2006). Team statistics are also proven to help a sports website with

their success, however Cal Poly lacks even a page for team and individual statistics. The lacrosse website is a place for the team to be recognized for the skill they possess and the success they have had; if these communication elements are ignored or forgotten, that important aspect is worthless. For a team that is so prominent in the scorebooks, it is equally as prominent for them to have a solid form of communication via their website. This is especially important for incoming Cal Poly students interested in playing lacrosse during their college career. It is essential for the team to make communication simple and concise.

“The current trend on Lacrosse websites has centered on increasing communication tools, whether that is through newsletters, the use of mass emails and texts or increasing web presence via social media,” says Oakley. The Cal Poly women’s lacrosse team does not have a Facebook page or a Twitter account and therefore are not utilizing even the simplest social media tools. Teams use Facebook to send out information about games and fundraising since it is the most accessible social media-networking site available.

Table 6
Presence of Valuable Sports Related Information and Communication

| COMMUNICATION | Cal Poly | UCSB | UCLA | Santa Clara | University of Michigan | CSU | Lindenwood University |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Up-to-date schedule available | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Calendar | No | No | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Roster | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| History of Team | No | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | No |
| Extensive Photo Gallery | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|
| Newsletters | No | No | No | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Email link | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Twitter/Facebook | No/No | No/Yes | Yes/Yes | Y/N | Yes/Yes | N/N | Yes/Yes |
| Player Biography | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Fundraising and Donations | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Team Statistics | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No |

Discussion

This year at the WDIA National Tournament, each game was recorded minute by minute on a live blog for fans to follow during the game. Technology has reached new capabilities with the connectedness created via the World Wide Web. Consumers expect the easily navigation and clean design. In the sports realm, consumers want the information and the answers to their questions. They desire player biographies, individual and team statistics, news, feature stories and game up-dates. This is all made possible with the speed and vastness of the Internet; examples of the integration of web design and sports can be seen at sites such as ESPN.com and SI.com (Sports Illustrated). These are sites to examine and create models after. Although not up to the caliber of sites such as ESPN.com or SI.com, the Cal Poly women's lacrosse team still represents the sports world and the relationship between team and fans, website and users. It is one of the most frustrating things for a user to search the Internet, come upon an interesting website only to find that it has not been updated (Reeve, 1998). After examining the lacrosse

website under the scrutiny of professional opinions on the importance of web design and user navigation, the website needs to go under construction.

The first step to reconstruction of the site requires the team to recognize the need for a strong, efficient website. The next step is for the team to either elect a member of the team to be in charge of the website or hire someone to reconstruct and maintain their website for them. For example, the UC Santa Barbara lacrosse team has their coach maintain and update their website on almost a daily basis. However, if they choose a player to maintain it, it is necessary for it to happen. Since the website is hosted by Laxteams.net, it gives the team the freedom to control their own website and what materials they want on it. However, none of this will be accomplished unless the importance of maintaining the website is clearly understood.

Another future step for the Cal Poly women's lacrosse team would be to successfully utilize social media. Social media tools exemplify the Internet's ability for networking and connection and tools such as Facebook, YouTube and even Twitter could prove very useful for the team. Other lacrosse teams have begun utilizing these tools and they are being embedded and integrated into the teams main website. Sports website providers such as Laxteams.net have already completed website templates designed specifically for social media add-ons. For example, the University of Michigan's women's lacrosse team has links to their Facebook fan page, links to their Twitter and YouTube videos of their games. By creating a Facebook fan page, a team can keep connected with their school and fans. A page can be a hub for quick information and big announcements. Twitter is the latest form of social media that sports teams are experimenting with. Kelly Whiteside, a reporter for *USA Today* says, "Pro athletes, teams,

leagues and TV networks have joined the Twitter craze, using the website to promote themselves and bypass traditional media to break news” (Whiteside, 2009). All but two of the lacrosse websites examined, Cal Poly and Colorado State, had Twitter accounts and links to their Twitter page. During the season the teams used their Twitter accounts to give live game reports and scores, initiating a constant connection with the team and their fans. Using Twitter for game updates would be very similar to the concept of a live game blog and could prove successful for the Cal Poly women’s lacrosse program.

Social media aside, the reality of producing and maintaining a strong, efficient website falls on the willingness of the team. Emily Buckel, the 2009-2010 Women’s Lacrosse President agrees with the fact that the website needs reconstruction. “In today’s society, the website is a way to build a fan base, keep in touch and constantly update our supports and parents on our success,” says Buckel, “Being a club program, their continual support is a huge factor in our existence.” Realistically, it will take work from girls on the team to successfully maintain the website in the coming years. Buckel suggests that either a team of two to three girls can be in charge of maintaining and updating the website, or when a new coach is hired that updating the website is part of their job description. Success for this program will be the team’s willingness to understand the significance of a strong, well maintained website and take action on the reconstruction process. With the ever-expanding Internet, the room for growth is promising and the research and theories on successfully maintaining a website are bountiful.

Conclusion

As a public relations concentration in journalism I began developing a love for visual communications and understanding how important the Internet is. Understanding these two aspects fully is crucial in the Internet age we live in today. Combining my expertise in lacrosse and my newfound knowledge of efficient websites, I learned how overall website design research applies to all genres of websites. Even though I was writing specifically about a sports website, I discovered that general research absolutely applies when critically analyzing a niche genre. Through this project I also learned how to analyze a website using specific criteria and therefore identify successful and hindering aspects in web design. This knowledge will be extremely helpful going into a career in visual communications and in everyday life. I hope to find a job in the near future where I can share my expertise on the importance of efficient web design and how to cater to the needs of the user. The job market is in need of college graduates who understand the importance of visual communications, especially pertaining to the use of social media. Completing this project hopefully gives me a head start into this competitive market.

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