



SEEING THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

Since the U.S. Congress established the Forest Service in 1905, the agency's mission has essentially remained constant: "To provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run." But by the time they embarked on a project to redesign the USDA Forest Service National Headquarters website (www.fs.fed.us), the dense and difficult-to-traverse site had begun to resemble the very forests it was designed to promote. The site's 2.9 million visitors were having difficulties navigating the site without being bogged down with extraneous data about departmental inner workings.

"The site was extremely content-heavy, and when our focus shifted to the formation of an online community, we knew that had to change," said Christine Murray, program manager in the Forest Services' communications office.

Making this shift represented a considerable challenge. The lands comprising the National Forest System are a staggering 191 million acres, or 8.5 percent of the total land area in the United States. Managing an area approximately the size of Texas poses a host of logistical, management and informational challenges, and the website was no exception. Over 80 individual forests had unique user interfaces, and rather than finding public information about the forests as vacation destinations, visitors were confused by links to Agriculture Department business, public affairs contacts and fire and aviation information.

The different look for each page raised other concerns as well. In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with

disabilities. Under Section 508, agencies must give the disabled access to public information comparable to that others receive. As it stood, the site could potentially confuse visually disabled visitors.

The problems with the existing site had internal repercussions as well. Due to the Forest Service's three-tier hierarchy of the national office, regional organizations and individual forests, many users were responsible for updating the system. As a result, management had become a very cumbersome process, and aggregating reports was especially troublesome.

The Forest Service began an intensive search for a vendor to develop a clear understanding of Forest Service goals and user needs, create an architecture to support those goals and needs and implement the site in a way that could be employed by field offices around the country. "We needed a partner expert at creating effective Web brands, while utilizing proven content management techniques," said Murray. "We found that partner in ClearBlue Technologies."

Clearing a Path to the Web

ClearBlue was selected from a host of other vendors through an intensive RFP process that culminated in its selection to provide comprehensive Web branding, development and content management programming services to the Forest Service. "We understood from the Forest Service that the ideal solution would not only improve the end user's experience with a more attractive and unified brand, but would also become easier to update by Forest Service stakeholders across the country," said Sara Dowden, Executive Producer of Creative Services at ClearBlue. "Therefore, we began by conducting an in-depth analysis of the existing site."

ClearBlue solicited opinions from key staff members, end users and design experts in order to receive input from a number of perspectives. The goal was to meet or exceed Section 508 guidelines in every way, extending the site's benefits to every user. The analysis included mapping the existing site, reviewing the site for outdated material, researching accessibility and recommending a new main page name to make the site more accessible to the public through major search engines.

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From this initial effort, ClearBlue designed and embarked on a three-pronged attack to address each of the agency's major concerns:

- An information architecture process designed to develop a "physical" outline, with content arranged by page or screen
- Creative development and graphic design to create an engaging Web brand and foster brand consistency across Forest Service sites
- A content management system to formulate an efficient and successful publishing plan for distributed content creation and editing

"ClearBlue's collaborative methodologies for site planning and design were extraordinarily effective in focusing our organization on its goals, creating user-centric content plans and creating an excellent site design," said Murray.

Caring for the Land and Serving People

In order to facilitate the easy sharing of information and future electronic commerce application development, the content management system resides on an IBM RS/6000 server running AIX, using an IBM WebSphere application server, all operated by the Forest Service itself. WebSphere also functions as the underlying application server for the content management system.

The Forest Service content management system centralizes content in a dynamic way, allowing users to create professional website content as easily as using a word processor while dramatically reducing the cost of the website's maintenance. While individual webmasters can now easily alter site content from any computer, any time, workflow processes and approval levels are also in place to protect the content's integrity.

While the newly re-designed site provides full compliance with Section 508, its benefits extend to every user. By developing standard-setting templates that meet user needs, utilize effective graphics and can be modeled by field sites, ClearBlue's efforts fully support the Forest Service's stated goal of providing a clear agency identity. Straightforward navigation and high quality information are the hallmarks of the new site. "This project was a great opportunity for ClearBlue to exercise its expertise in developing robust, dynamic sites to integrate existing database information, comply with government accessibility guidelines and demonstrate tremendous

ease-of-use," says Sharon Glott, Practice Leader for ClearBlue's Government Solutions. And with the number of visitors expected to double to 5.8 million this year, ClearBlue's architecture was built with the flexibility to grow with the Forest Service's needs.

Taking into account the unique needs of the individual field offices, ClearBlue took the next logical step by



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implementing a nation-wide training focused on content managers, system administrators and technical maintenance employees acquiring skills and knowledge relevant to enhancing job performance.

Christine Murray feels confident that Web visitors will be pleased with the results. "ClearBlue understood this project, and their plan provided a clear, logical roadmap to success. As a result, the Forest Service has taken its Web enterprise to a significantly higher level of functionality and sophistication." ■