eXtension

Qualitative Appraisal Report

October 4, 2010

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BRAIN TRAFFIC
Introduction

About a qualitative content appraisal
During a qualitative content appraisal, we thoroughly evaluate your content, looking at several attributes that were selected based on your organizational goals. We then provide an in-depth report that focuses on key aspects of your content strategy, identifies trouble spots, and provides recommendations for improvement.

About the qualitative appraisal documents
There are two documents in the qualitative appraisal:

- **Appraisal report (this document)** – The report provides the high-level findings that resulted from the page-level analysis.
- **Full appraisal spreadsheet** – The appraisal spreadsheet includes the raw page-level analysis of the content on eXtension.org.
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Section 1: Appraisal Report Overview

GOALS

The purpose of analyzing the content on eXtension.org is to review the existing site for overall effectiveness and adherence to your organization’s goals.

In the strategic content foundation for this project, these three organizational goals were identified:

• Empower people to make smart decisions that improve the quality of their lives
• Provide credible, reliable, research-based information, tools, and solutions people can use
• Bestow the knowledge from the best minds at land grant universities to the community-at-large

In addition, you’ve identified the following key guiding principles for content creation:

• Content developed by an eXtension CoP becomes part of that community.
• Content creators will be credited for their contributions, which may affect promotions and tenure.
• Content contributors should believe in collaborating on content—including letting others in the CoP make decisions about content they’ve created.
• Duplication of existing content should be avoided.
• Content contributors should strive to understand who their content is for—local audience vs. national audience; novice reader vs. expert reader.
• CoP content will need to change and evolve to meet the needs of CoP audiences.

WHAT WE DID

Scope

For this website appraisal, we assessed 180 pages of web content. This encompassed a cross-section of the content produced by the HorseQuest and Family Caregiving communities of practice (CoPs).

Since a full site appraisal was not in scope for this project, we selected pages to assess based on the content mix on the site (e.g., since articles are the most common format, we selected a higher proportion of articles than other less frequently used formats).
Content selection

Within each of the two chosen CoPs, we tried to select a range of content across many subtopic areas. Selecting article-type content from the Articles sections gave us a different sampling of content than we might have seen if we’d browsed through specific subtopic areas instead; article listings in the subtopic areas seem to reflect a lower proportion of news-release-style articles.

Process

For each assessed page, we reviewed your content and rated it on several attributes that are relevant to your website goals (see Appraisal Attributes below). After collecting the data, we conducted additional analysis to look at significant subsets of the data, chosen on the basis of your content mix and goals.

APPRAISAL ATTRIBUTES

As we reviewed your site, we gathered information on the following attributes for each page.

- Title and URL
- Format
- Knowledge level
- Interrelatedness
- Relevance
- Usability
- Actionability

See Section 2 for attribute definitions, assessment criteria, results, and key findings.

We recommend an additional appraisal attribute when your CoPs assess their own content: differentiation. See page 14 for details.
USING THE SPREADSHEET

The spreadsheet contains a page-by-page assessment of how your content scored on the attributes listed above.

Here are a few tips that will help you interpret the spreadsheet:

• Each CoP whose content we assessed has its own tab: HorseQuest and Family Caregiving.
• The Stats tab has formulas that tally the ratings for each attribute.
• The main Stats tab contains ratings for all attributes for both CoPs, along with combined scores for all content we appraised (“entire site”). There are also separate Stats pages for each CoP that can be adapted for future appraisals done within the CoPs.
• The Analysis tab has formulas that juxtapose two or more attributes to dig deeper into the appraisal results.
• Because of rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100%.
• The appraisal is a snapshot of a large volume of content. Instead of focusing on specific ratings for an individual page, we recommend looking at the larger patterns and issues.
Section 2: Your Content’s Performance

This section of the appraisal report provides overall ratings for each attribute, along with key findings. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Throughout this document, where multiple criteria are listed for a rating, pages qualify for that rating by meeting one or more of the listed criteria.

FORMAT

Is the content mostly text or a different medium?

Where we’ve included an italicized section title in the Meaning column, it means that content was assigned that format based on its placement on the site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>HorseQuest</th>
<th>Family Caregiving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Content in Answers from our Experts</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article</td>
<td>Content that is solely or primarily text</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>Content that is solely or primarily sound files</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Lesson</td>
<td>Online lessons or tools</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Content in In the News</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>Content that is solely or primarily video</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that these percentages reflect the content that was chosen for the appraisal—not an objective measurement of the full site content.

When you perform full appraisals of CoP content in the future, you may want to add formats that were omitted from this partial appraisal, or added to the site later, such as “webcast.” If there are concerns that text content is too long or too short, “article” could be broken out into multiple subcategories by approximate length.

Key findings

We selected this proportion of content formats based on what we saw on the eXtension site: a predominance of text content, especially articles.

In a full appraisal, this attribute would be useful as a snapshot of the content mix. In a partial appraisal like this one, it mainly serves to provide context for the other ratings and allow you to break out ratings by content format.
KNOWLEDGE LEVEL

What level of subject matter knowledge is needed to understand or use this page?

As we reviewed pages, we looked for content that a general audience could readily understand without expertise in the subject matter. Clues that content might require specialized knowledge include: undefined terms, obscure references, or explanations that assume familiarity with the subject matter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>HorseQuest</th>
<th>Family Caregiving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–LOW</td>
<td>No specialized knowledge is required or assumed.</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–MEDIUM</td>
<td>Some knowledge is required.</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–HIGH</td>
<td>A high level of subject matter knowledge is required.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key findings

Overall, the content we assessed was fairly well suited to a general audience: 84% overall could be understood without any specialized knowledge.

Knowledge level depends on the intended audience. This may vary from CoP to CoP, with some CoPs having content that is meant for a more knowledgeable audience—for example, the HorseQuest CoP is for people who raise horses, who will necessarily have a higher level of expertise than the general public. This is largely why HorseQuest content rated as requiring a higher knowledge level than Family Caregiving.

Each CoP will need to identify its primary audience and set its own baseline for knowledge level. Keep in mind that even for communities likely to have more expertise, such as farmers, there are always some less experienced users. Students or beginners in any field can benefit from content that doesn’t assume specialized knowledge, or includes links to content that explains unfamiliar concepts or terminology. The latter approach is useful for content that’s aimed primarily at a more expert audience but needs to be accessible to beginners as well.
INTERRELATEDNESS

Does this content fit well with, and link to, other CoP content?

In assessing content for this attribute, we looked for ways the content was integrated into the CoP: links to other content, tags to help in information retrieval, and a tone that was consistent with other CoP content and eXtension as a whole. We also looked for the content’s subject matter to fit well with the overall focus of the CoP.

In many cases, content with a low score on interrelatedness is not bad content—it’s just not integrated well into the site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>HorseQuest</th>
<th>Family Caregiving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1—LOW | • Lack of working links to other content  
 • Tone is inconsistent with other content in a way that’s strongly distracting.  
 • Content is off-topic | 48%   | 41%        | 56%               |
| 2—MEDIUM | • Links exist but some are broken  
 • Tone is moderately inconsistent with other CoP content  
 • Tags are mostly absent (e.g., only one tag and it’s non-specific) | 36% | 46% | 26% |
| 3—HIGH | • Good links, tone, tags | 15% | 11% | 19% |

Key findings

Overall, we found that about 85% of the content we assessed was not optimally integrated into its CoP. Typically, we found few or no links to related content within eXtension. Even content that was part of a series sometimes lacked links to the rest of the series, such as Relating Form to Function in HorseQuest.

Providing links to related eXtension content encourages users to dig deeper in the site and rely on eXtension as an information source—not just for the answer to one question.
RELEVANCE

Is the content up-to-date and of current interest to its intended audience?

As we reviewed your content, we tried to assess whether a given page was of current interest to a national audience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>HorseQuest</th>
<th>Family Caregiving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–LOW</td>
<td>Outdated, no longer relevant</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–MEDIUM</td>
<td>Appears dated/stale or is of interest only to a small geographic area</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–HIGH</td>
<td>Timely or “evergreen” content</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key findings

The content we assessed did very well on relevance overall, with 91% of content rated medium or high.

Content about a specific time period or event can be relevant—but not indefinitely. Your content creation guidelines do suggest that an expiration date be assigned to all content. The audit process helps ensure that content doesn’t fall through the cracks.

Additional recommendations to maintain and improve content relevance include:

- Separate time-sensitive content from “evergreen” content (i.e., content whose relevance is unchanged over time) so you can retire time-sensitive content without losing still-useful information.
- Look for the broader relevance of geographically-specific information, or consider publishing it on state extension sites instead of eXtension.
**USABILITY**

Is the content presented effectively?

For this attribute, we looked at web writing best practices—factors within the content that can help or hinder its effectiveness, such as formatting and writing style. We looked for:

- Clear, descriptive headings and subheads
- Appropriate sentence and paragraph length
- Use of graphics, bullets, tables, charts, etc., where appropriate
- Overall readability

Note that “usability” does not assess whether content is worthwhile or contains useful information. Substantial and important content can rate low for usability if the factors described above interfere with its effectiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
<th>HorseQuest (%)</th>
<th>Family Caregiving (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–LOW</td>
<td>Numerous minor problems, a few moderate problems, or one major problem that seriously interferes with the content.</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–MEDIUM</td>
<td>Minor to moderate problem(s).</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–HIGH</td>
<td>No significant problems.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key findings**

Overall, we found that nearly all of the content we assessed had some issues that hindered its effectiveness. The most common issues we observed:

- **Poor scannability** because of the lack of subheads, boldfaced key phrases, and other visual cues for readers. This is a recurring problem with content that wasn’t originally written for the web, such as press releases.

  *Recommendation*: When creating new content, ensure that it contains these helpful elements. Revise existing content to add them where appropriate. For helpful guidance on how to write well for the web, see Jakob Nielsen’s site: [http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/](http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/).

- **Excerpts** rather than full articles. We began noting this on the spreadsheet but quickly found it was a pervasive issue. In many cases, the user has to click a link—and leave the eXtension site—to get the real information. This may drive traffic to local university and extension websites, but it doesn’t build the eXtension brand: users leave instead of exploring, and they may perceive the information as coming from that specific institution instead of eXtension as a whole.

  *Recommendation*: Avoid sending users away from your site. Post full articles on the eXtension site, while giving credit to the authoring institution.
• “Answers” content had a few unique issues. Because Q&As are fairly random, search is the only effective way to navigate through that content—it isn’t grouped topically. Also, using the actual question as the title meant that some pieces had long, unwieldy titles.

Recommendation: Assign a short but descriptive title to every Q&A to help users more easily find the information they’re looking for. Create full articles based on questions of general interest and integrate them into the subtopic areas.

There were also a number of things the content did right. Article titles were generally descriptive and content was readable. We found that most content creators did a good job of presenting material in clear language.

You’re aware that your CoP members are experts in their field but not experts in web writing. Training is one way to bridge the gap. Another is to regularly promote the helpful tools and resources housed in the wiki.
ACTIONABILITY

Does the page provide a clear next step for its current audience, and does it facilitate that step?

As we assessed pages, we looked for a clear, specific call to action (CTA) and anything within the content that would facilitate that action. In the case of instructional content, we looked for logical steps that were easy to follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>HorseQuest</th>
<th>Family Caregiving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–LOW</td>
<td>No next steps given.</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–MEDIUM</td>
<td>Next step is implied or vague; next step depends on a link that is broken; indirect or absent CTA.</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–HIGH</td>
<td>Next step is clear, specific, and stated explicitly; effective CTA.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key findings

We found that in the content we assessed, actionability ratings were distributed fairly evenly between low, medium, and high.

Actionable content helps build relationships with users and positions eXtension as a source for effective, usable information. The nature of your content provides good opportunities for actionability: extension information is focused on practical solutions for real issues. For educational content, actionability can be as simple as providing clear links—and encouragement—to dig deeper into the CoP’s information resources.
DIFFERENTIATION

Does the page fill a unique need, providing information or perspective that is not readily available elsewhere?

We did not assess content for this attribute. With a limited-scope appraisal and an incomplete familiarity with the subject matter, we aren’t positioned well to gauge differentiation accurately.

However, your CoPs have a good vantage point from which to assess differentiation for their own subject matter. CoP experts will have a better grasp of what aspects of their subjects are covered elsewhere on the web or within eXtension. They can judge whether a given piece of content serves a unique need.

A low rating overall on differentiation would suggest that a CoP may want to refocus its content creation efforts to offer a more unique set of knowledge.
OTHER OBSERVATIONS

During any content appraisal, issues typically emerge that are not covered (or not covered fully) by the appraisal attributes. For example, there may be unforeseen challenges specific to one CoP, or overall navigation issues that can’t be fully described by comments on any single page.

This section of the appraisal report captures information gained from an examination of the content that doesn’t fit neatly within the appraisal attribute sections.

Key findings overall

- **User experience differs substantially based on navigation method.** If you browse the CoP content through the Articles section (as we did when we looked for articles to assess), much of what you see consists of news releases. If you browse the content through the topic sections (such as Horses > Nutrition), you see more actual articles.

- **Many articles are really news releases.** It often wasn’t clear why one piece was listed under News and another under Articles.

- **Many articles are “teasers.”** We saw a number of pieces that provided only a brief excerpt and a link to an external site. This drives traffic to those sites and away from eXtension.

- **News releases tended to get low ratings overall.** Many of the news releases we assessed appeared to be repurposed articles from other websites, rather than unique content. Some had information that was specific to one geographic area and one time period (e.g., a regional event); others appeared to be local, with regional references throughout, but actually addressed topics of general interest. Actionability was often low, since news releases are typically descriptive rather than prescriptive. Usability ratings were often low because news releases were less likely to have web-friendly formatting such as bold and subheads.

- **Older content sinks to the bottom, even if it’s important.** Articles are automatically displayed in order of publication date. Our understanding is that your content management system requires this. In cases where newer is better—such as news releases—this sorting method works. But for other kinds of content, valuable content can wind up buried deep in the list of search results.

- **“Answers” content has some built-in disadvantages.** These are answers to specific questions and aren’t necessarily useful to the audience as a whole. Search is likely to be hit-or-miss, depending on keywords. Some questions are long and don’t get to the point quickly, and these don’t make good content titles. Overall, we’d recommend looking for patterns in the questions and writing actual articles based on common topics, using Q&As as a stopgap until more substantial content is ready.

- **Navigation is inconsistent.** From many pages—including sections such as Articles, subtopic pages, and individual articles—we found there was no clear way to return to the CoP home page. In many cases the “[X] Home” button under the navigation bar was simply absent. We also found it confusing that the left end of the navigation bar pointed to the main eXtension site but the right side pointed to the CoP content, without any visual differentiation between the two sections.
Section 3: Overall results

In reviewing 180 pages of your site, we found a lot of good, useful content. It doesn’t make the best use of the web as a medium—but as you work to make eXtension content more effective, you’re starting from a good position, with clear and useful material.

Looking at the patterns that emerged during the appraisal, we saw some areas where there are opportunities to improve your content’s effectiveness.

• **Content not well adapted for the web.** The weaker content we saw was material that wasn’t written specifically as a web article, such as press releases and Q&As. By adding visual cues like subheads, bold type, and bulleted lists, you can better accommodate the way people read on the web—scanning, skimming, “foraging” for information.

• **Insubstantial or isolated content within the CoP.**
  - Many articles are brief “teaser” articles that link to an external site. Users get the real information once they follow the link—and leave the eXtension site. This drives traffic away from other CoP content.
  - Articles often don’t provide links to other related content within eXtension, even when they’re part of a series. By adding these links, you can help your audience see eXtension and the CoPs as comprehensive information sources—not just a quick answer to one question.

We also saw some real strengths in your site:

• **Clarity of writing.** It’s clear that extension experts know how to write for their audience. We didn’t see the kind of dense academic writing that’s common in educational environments.

• **Relevance.** Apart from some outdated news pieces, we found a lot of content that would be relevant, now and in the future, to a broad audience.

• **Practical subject matter.** Extension content is about practical, real-world solutions. This lends itself well to writing actionable content. And people who find your site are likely to have a problem they’re trying to solve—so they’re motivated to learn.

With a solid content appraisal process in place, you can address the problem areas and build on these strengths to make your content more usable and useful to your audience.