How a Nonprofit's Web Site Redesign Increased Functionality, Public Interest, and Donations

By Kimberly Smith – from the library of www.MarketingProfs.com

Company: Acumen Fund
Contact: Mariko Tada, knowledge and communications manager at Acumen Fund
Location: New York, NY
Industry: Nonprofit
Annual revenue: Confidential
Number of employees: 50

Quick Read

For nonprofit organizations such as Acumen Fund, which uses philanthropic capital and donations to help finance foreign entrepreneurs working to improve poverty conditions in developing nations, the human story is key for capturing the attention and heart of would-be volunteers, sponsors, and, in Acumen Fund's case, investors.

Acumen Fund's Web site, however, was restricted by an inflexible backend system, which limited the organization's ability to effectively communicate and portray its mission, progress, and overall brand.

With the help of creative-services firm MSDS, Acumen Fund was able to meet the needs of its distinct audiences and strengthen its brand through a complete site redesign that decentralized content management, introduced interactive messaging, and reorganized site navigation to provide users with easy access to the information they need.

As a result, users are spending more time on the site and returning more often; moreover, both the frequency and the amounts of online donations have increased.

Challenge

Acumen Fund is an innovative nonprofit organization that has taken to fighting global poverty through venture fund investments. It has offices in India, Kenya, and Pakistan, in addition to New York.

Its Web site works as a key source of information for a variety of audiences:

- Its donor community, ranging from major institutions to individuals, which relies on the organization's financial information to make investment decisions

- The local entrepreneurs whose fieldwork is financed through Acumen Fund investments
- The universities with which Acumen Fund partners for research
- The organization's fellows in the field, who have many stories to tell through their first-hand experiences with the difficulties that exist and the progress being made
- Individuals who want to volunteer and get involved in the organization
- General supporters who are interested in the causes that Acumen Fund supports

Though credible, the Web site wasn't meeting the organization's needs when Acumen Fund approached MSDS, a New York City-based creative services agency, in early 2007.

Rather than connecting with its audiences through stories and photographs of its work in action, the Web site read more like a brochure for the organization and did not allow for dynamic content. This was largely due to an inflexible centralized backend system that made it difficult and time-consuming to update or add new content.

Consequently, the Web site—and its messaging—were unable to evolve with the organization; nor could the site communicate all the information and learnings that continued to come from the field.

"There were so many things we wanted to share and no good way to share them," recalled Mariko Tada, Acumen Fund's knowledge and communications manager.

The organization charged MSDS with re-creating the Web site to strengthen its brand in line with the needs of each audience segment, and to improve both functionality and navigation so that any new content added in support of that goal would be logically organized and readily accessible to site visitors

Campaign

MSDS redesigned the Acumen Fund site to include:

- *An easy-to-use backend system:* Built on MSDS's platform, the new site allowed for decentralized content management so that authorized users from all Acumen Fund locations could easily upload and manage content using structured page templates. A tagging system was also implemented so that new content could be tagged by investment type, country, etc. and automatically linked to other related information on the site. In addition, pages detailing investment metrics were programmed for real-time updates via a data feed from the organization's Google-powered portfolio data management system.

- *Interactive content:* The new site also allowed for a broader array of content, including field videos and photo essays used to depict the human story. Content was arranged so that each investment portfolio and individual investment page included a list of links to related information, including case studies, whitepapers, and financials, as well as human-interest stories. A searchable "Knowledge Center" was also created to provide a single resource where users could access information. Moreover, users were given options to share each article, video, and photo essay via Digg, Delicious, Facebook and personal email.

- *A strong visual identity:* It was important to Acumen Fund that its new brand become a reflection of its mission, values, and the areas where its projects are based; at the same time, it needed to speak to the academic and financial expectations of its partners and investors. Accordingly, MSDS used bright colors and local photographs in a clean, gridded design that offered local flavor without undermining the precision of the organization's financial metrics.

Results

The Web site redesign helped to establish a relevant and representative brand for Acumen Fund while enabling the organization to easily upload new content as desired and more effectively realize its knowledge-sharing goals.

As a result, both the user time spent on the site and the return visitor usage have increased about 25% compared with the same period last year.

And although fundraising was not considered a top-tier goal for the redesign, the rebranding efforts and additional information available on the site appear to have had an impact. Compared with the year prior, twice as many people have made donations through the site, and the dollar amount for online donations has tripled.

"The new site is engaging people more than our previous site," said Tada. "We're not pushing donations, but people feel compelled" to donate nevertheless.

Lessons Learned

By marrying its financial information with first-person accounts and visuals such as photos and videos, Acumen Fund was able to (1) humanize its investments with the faces of the people in need and (2) go beyond the numbers to show the real results and progress being made in the field through these investments.

By using tags and delineating how content is organized on the site, Acumen Fund also enabled users to easily explore the types of information that interest them most, and to become introduced to alternate related information which they might not have looked into otherwise.

In addition, by encouraging users to share its content via Digg, Facebook, etc., Acumen Fund is enabling its message to achieve broader awareness and support in a highly cost-conscious fashion.

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