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DESIGN STUDIO

Back to the Drawing Board
The Infoseek Redesign: A Study in Give-and-Take

**by
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When a major search engine site like **Infoseek** undergoes a redesign, you'd think that it would be like putting up new signs along a major interstate highway -- a job that would take months and months. After all, Infoseek serves millions of people, and is one of the most frequently visited Internet search engines.

But the Santa Clara, Calif.-based Infoseek managed to do a comprehensive redesign -- and even add many new features -- in just three weeks. And according to the press acclaim and heavy traffic, they've done a pretty good job.

Internet World named Infoseek "best of the test" in its comparative review of Internet search engines. PCWeek said Infoseek "is the most fully equipped search site PCWeek Labs has seen."

So how did the company pull this amazing feat off?

Lots of give-and-take, long hours, regular meetings, teamwork, and patience, according to Stacey Ashlund, Infoseek's user interface (UI) designer and usability engineer, and the lead designer on this project.

The Mission
It all started in late 1996, when Infoseek's

executives decided it was high-time for a redesign. They wanted to integrate the three separate and inconsistent areas: Infoseek Guide (the search engine and directory), Infoseek Personal, and Infoseek Ultra (for more advanced searches).

The mission for the redesign: That the user always be able to tell where they've been, where they can go, and what they can do.

In order to accomplish all this by November, Daniella Russo, VP of Product Management, sequestered interface designer Ashlund with an HTML designer and graphics designer off-site away from distractions, and gave the team just three weeks to complete the redesign.

The Process

Under Ashlund's direction, the designers cranked out a series of design ideas and presented them to the executives as soon as they were ready. Over the next three weeks they followed a continual back-and-forth routine. Work on mockups. Present to execs. Redesign according to their requests. Go back for another review meeting in a few days. Then make design changes again.

By the second week, the meeting room walls were covered with rejected designs. Either Engineering didn't think a design would offer enough performance, or Marketing didn't think the graphics were large enough, or Advertising didn't like the advertising banner placement. Design after design was killed for one of these reasons.

Above all, management wanted to meet the needs of their ultimate critic -- the user.

Usability Tests

To make sure they were meeting the users' needs, Ashlund held a two-day user study group. A market research firm recruited the seven testers, they rented video equipment, and then gave the users sample things to do with mockups of the redesigned site. They asked the testers what they did and why they did it, and and videotaped their comments.

If the users didn't use the tools the way they were expected, the designers knew they were going down the wrong road. "We paid attention to the things that the majority of people did," says Ashlund.

They also designed the site for the broadest user base, including those with 14.4 modem speeds and 15-inch monitors. Wanting to meet the needs of a broad user base, they couldn't do things that would have unacceptable performance for the majority of users. For instance, they couldn't use large graphics, and they couldn't use too many graphics on a page. "We didn't want to sacrifice performance for design," explains Ashlund.

They also kept in mind that site performance is not consistent across all platforms and browsers, and they were designing the site for all the major browsers. Therefore, they made adjustments such as having versions with and without tables, since not all browsers support tables.

"It's like building a kiosk for Disneyland," says Ashlund. "The site has to be sturdy and useful for the general population."

Back to the Drawing Board

After two weeks of going back and forth

with several designs, Ashlund felt they came up with something that would at last meet the company's needs and desires -- a straightforward, easy-to-understand interface design.

But during her presentation to the executives in late October, one VP asked, "Where's the design?" Then John Nauman, VP of Engineering, replied, "Oh, they haven't designed it yet!"

With that said, they felt the need to get outside graphic design help. Within days they collected design treatments from several designers, including US Interactive in New York.

Yet many of the designs turned out to either be impractical for the engineers to implement, didn't emphasize the right features, or didn't have the right look and feel. In the end, they tweaked the graphics late one night with help from a friend.

At last, Ashlund felt they had accomplished their mission. And they had just two days left on their deadline. Everything seemed to be ready to go.

Then Engineering announced they couldn't run the intended three-column layout because it would delay download time. A two-column layout, however, would mean pushing the advertising banner down farther on the page, which was not a viable alternative. So Ashlund's team shrank the font size down as a compromise, reworked it into two columns, and left the ad banner where it was originally placed.

At last, the execs at Infoseek had a design they could live with. And thus it went live on Nov. 14, 1996. Amazingly enough, it was on time and within budget.

Results

By all accounts, the redesign appears to be successful. Marketing reports a 30% jump in traffic, giving them an average of more than 5 million page views a day in the first few months of this year. And, Russo says, users are indeed "getting it."

In a **study** of Family Testers, sponsored by FamilyPC magazine, Infoseek pulled high scores for speed, scoring system, customization, and searching tips. "It was very easy to use, the matches were great, and the scoring system was very useful," said one tester.

The redesign has garnered lavish praise from the trade press. A PCWeek reviewer **wrote**, "Major changes to the Infoseek site have moved it beyond a simple search engine to a full-service Internet information source...with the enhancements, Infoseek has become one of the most full-service and user-friendly search sites on the Web."

A February, 1997 review in PC Computing said: "If you're on a mission, try the totally revamped Infoseek. It has merged four search engines into one integrated tool that's accurate, current, comprehensive, and superfast."

Give-and-Take

Considering the intense deadline and conflicting needs from each department head, how did the redesign team manage to pull things off so well?

Ashlund attributes it to the compromises everyone had to make. For example, when Marketing wanted larger, splashier graphics, the designers gave them highly exaggerated colors and huge graphics "as a starting point."

Then when Engineering wanted smaller

and fewer graphics, they reduced the graphics until they reached a mutual consensus. "We balanced both requirements in the end," she says.

At the same time, whenever Design felt that Engineering was going off the deep end with their ideas, (when they were not "user-friendly"), they told them so. For instance, at one point Engineering wanted to make changes that Ashlund felt would be too confusing to the user (requiring that the user toggle back and forth to different screens). So instead, they integrated the engineers' ideas into one cohesive interface.

When disagreements arose between departments, Ashlund says they simply presented "a lot of alternatives," and then came to a mutual agreement.

It also helped that they worked with a small team of in-house designers, Ashlund adds. "It was great for bouncing ideas off each other and working quickly."

Lessons Learned

This turned out to be a project where lessons were learned about what to do better in the future. Having more time was one thing mentioned by all the team players. Having a chance to conduct even more user testing was another common desire -- "having small, focused tests all throughout the redesign process," says Russo.

Ashlund believes the most difficult part of the job was needing to make presentations every two days to the executives. "We never really got a chance to carry a concept out because whenever we made a presentation to the execs they'd say, 'What about this?' and we'd say we thought of that already. But if we

didn't have something to show them, they didn't believe it wouldn't work, or they didn't have the same picture in their mind," she says.

"It's hard to crank out so many mock-ups in such a short period of time. That was pretty frustrating." (As the weeks wore on, Ashlund did mockups right then and there in the meetings, by cutting and pasting comps, or drawing sketches with colored pens.)

As for Russo, her biggest headache was having to deal with many different conflicting opinions about the interface design. "Everyone seemed to have an expert opinion about what would work best," she says. "The biggest arguments would be around what would promote the usage of the product versus what would attract more clicks on ads."

Advice to Others

To others who might be contemplating a major redesign of their company Web site, the Infoseek redesign team has this advice to impart:

Daniella Russo (VP of Product Management): "Test, test, test, and do not take anything for granted! Your opinions do not matter. Be willing to listen and learn from users' preferences."

Ned Desmond (Editor and Project Coordinator): "Establish clear priorities, and get top-level management to back them up. Get the best perspective -- both inside and out. Make sure there is a review loop that includes all parties that have a stake in the real user interface."

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John Nauman (Engineering Director): "Determine reasonable goals around what needs to be accomplished and how long it needs to take. Dedicate the folks necessary to the task, and don't let them

get involved in normal day-to-day activities. Do frequent reviews to check in with the team. And once the design is complete, take the time to test it with the user base that you suspect will be using it."

Stacey Ashlund (Senior Interface Designer): "Have lots of patience and dynamically changing goals!"

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