How to Promote Community Portals

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INTRODUCTION

Information content of the Web has, in the last 10 years, changed from informative to communicative. Web pages, especially homepages, were the foremost places where companies, organizations, and individuals alike expressed their existence online and provided some information about themselves, like their products, services, or artefacts that they related to. On the common Web environment, the search engines were harvesting this information and made it available and meaningful for the masses of Web users. In the early days of Web, this factor alone justified the usage of Web as a marketing tool and as an easy way to share important information between collaborating partners.

BACKGROUND

In more recent years, the evolving Web technology has spawned more interactive and fine-grained approaches and tools for using the Web. Examples of these have been features like online quizzes and games, for example, contained on the Web pages. Even here, Web users are mainly information consumers, and their actions and opinions are stored in the underlying databases behind the Web-based information systems and applications. The strong growth of peer-to-peer type Web activities has emphasized the key role of users as information producers also (Aigrain, 2003).

Also, the real-time connectivity and other shared information aspects, like time, space, price, availability, and "rumours," have accelerated both the information production and consumptions processes in the Web. Coordination of information via both traditional publishers with their online news, archives, and widespread public corners have made the information more vivid to all the users alike. The different home multimedia applications, like radio, digital TV, and others, are also heavily using the Web for providing two-way user interaction and feedback into the main streams of communication. Finally, even automated information production, like Web cameras, online weather stations, satellite images, maps, home, and industry automation systems and devices, often are Web enabled in their presentation options.

COMMUNITY PORTALS

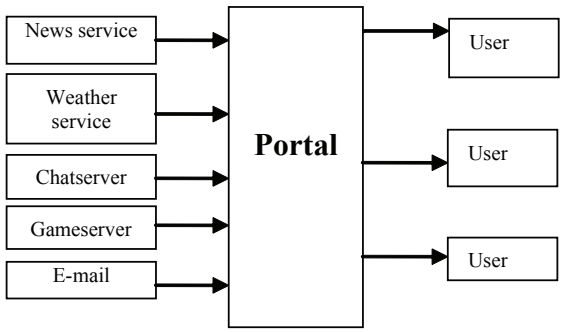
Personal Portals

Web portals are sites on the World Wide Web that provide a number of services to their registered users. The services can often be personalized by the users and implement distributed applications in order to bring together a wide variety of services under a single Web address. Portals are often designed to be places where the user will return as often as possible, perhaps even make it their starting page on their browsers.

In order to entice the users to return time after time, portals provide services that the user will want to use daily. Services such as Web searches, e-mail, news, games, TV-listings, and so forth, are common. In order to provide revenue, advertising and shopping are common features in commercial Web portals. On the other hand, government portals gather various pieces of information on one site (Grönlund & Albinsson, 2000). These are formed to help the citizens to find what they need more easily, as well as submit various forms.

Many Web portals grew from single services, such as Web directories, news services, or search sites. Commercial portals needed something to keep their users interested in order to keep the user in the portal for a longer period of time and thus, to increase advertising revenues, so new

Figure 1. Portals provide different services to different users



services were adopted. Most of these services were already proven to be popular and easy to implement. Commercial portals, as well as other actors on the Internet, like Google, are attempting to become as ubiquitous as possible and thus, improve their share of the valuable market.

Many companies also provide portals for their different stakeholders. These are often referred to as B2C (business to consumer), B2D (business to distributor), B2E (business to employee), B2B (business to business), B2G (business to government), or similar names. In large organizations, the B2E portals are the most important and varied. They provide a place where the employees can find any piece of information they might need. They also function as groupware, where the employees can cooperate, publish documents within the organization, and so forth. For the other stakeholders, the portals can provide personalized content and services, integration with their own systems and information. Ideally, these portals would provide a number of Web services for the stakeholders that would facilitate for automatic processes between two organizations. This would be especially useful for businesses on government portals, so that reporting revenues and such would be as easy as possible.

Portals for Communities

Community portals are portals provided for a community of people with a similar interest. Community portals can be regional (see eKylve), occupational (auditnet.org for professional auditors), or simply places for hobbyists to gather (TheRPGPortal.com for role-playing gamers), among other things. Community portals are also an excellent way for people working or studying abroad to keep in touch with their native culture. Community portals can provide the members with information, shopping, and so forth, but also the feeling of social community. In community portals, the social side is very pronounced. Because of this, information is often dispersed in the form of stories rather than facts. Users of community portals may develop strong bonds with the other users, despite never having met and possible vast geographical division.

The success factors of online communities have not been studied well. Jenny Preece has developed a method that can be used to verify usability and functionality of the platform, software used by the online communities in their activities. Simultaneously, she has traced definitions and gauges of the success factors of the online communities. For this purpose, an end-user based set of gauges has been developed that is used to clarify the factors of interactive, real-time software solutions in relation to their uses.

According to Preece (1994, 2000), the success factors can be divided by the factors supporting sociability and usability. Sociability factors are divided by the significance of the software for its end-users, the population and the special needs of the end-users, and the procedures used in the sessions. The usability factors are divided by the time needed to learn dialog and the interaction, how long it takes to learn to use the user information (help-section of the program), the internal navigation of software, and its factors. Finally, whether the users are able to find all the needed components of the software must be explored. With all the mentioned factors in mind, the time and the steps the user takes while fulfilling a task are studied.

As the software is more and more standard in form and look, most users find it easy enough to adapt into a certain application on the Web. Therefore, usability is not as big an issue as the social side of the current online communities. Sociability is measured by mean of use, people, and the procedures. Mean of use is based on the number and quality of the messages and comments sent. Importance is placed on the accuracy of the discussion and the nature of interaction between the members. The number of people is important, but also their roles and experience. Age, sex, and special