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"Rural Arizona Chambers of Commerce: Usability of Web Sites"

Introduction

This document is a continuation of previous research undertaken by the author aimed at determining the presence and usability of web sites targeting senior internet web surfers considering visiting or resettlement to Arizona's rural communities. The literature review will not be present in this document for the benefit of the reader as it was outlined in the previous presentation.

A Brief Review

Economic and demographic forces in latter part of the 20th century wreaked havoc on Arizona's rural communities. Decline in agriculture and mining sectors in conjunction with the superior opportunities associated with urban living made remaining in rural environs an unattractive option for the more ambitious and capable of wage earners. In an interesting paradox, the demographic forces which brought about economic decline of rural communities may again become their salvation.

The United States is approaching an era that noted geriatric expert Ken Dychtwald called the "Age Wave." Expectations are that within the next several decades the population of those exceeding the age of 65 will make up approximately one third of the American population. The new demographic group will look for cheaper housing,

safe environments, abundance of recreational opportunities, life enriching activities and access to quality healthcare, categories that rural communities in most cases can provide easily.

Rural communities by their very nature are geographically remote and limited economically. Yet the lure of Arizona's wide open spaces add billions to State Gross Domestic Product from visitors to the state and currently accounts for over a quarter of the State General Fund. Retirees retreating in the seasonal migration from all parts the United States and Canada account for a significant portion of that income. The clear economic winners however have been the large urban communities. Phoenix alone has countless senior communities, no doubt attracted by the aforementioned amenities available to them.

Data can be deceiving and the face value of the economic statistics demonstrating that elderly migrants favor urban climates is clearly not the whole story. Target marketing aimed at this wealthy segment of the population accounts for a much of the success that real estate developers like Del Webb and the Sun Cities groups have enjoyed. But how has Arizona's rural communities marketing efforts fared by comparison?

Although there are institutions in place devoted to assisting the communication needs, (marketing and otherwise) of Arizona's rural communities (League of Arizona Cities and Towns and Arizona Office of Tourism), previous research by this author demonstrated unequivocally that many rural communities fared poorly, lacking even a basic web presence to inform and attract possible migrants to their towns. Of those that did have web sites, many were so dysfunctional with respect to the needs of senior web surfers that they would have little to no value for this segment of the population.

The Chambers of Commerce

Local Chambers of Commerce are historically the first point of contact for information and the marketing arm of the local community. There are others of course but the first institution that comes to mind when you think of promoting the community to those outside the region is the local Chamber. Brochures, event calendars, maps and relocation packages are all quintessential components of an organized effort to sell the community. With the emergence of web technology, this medium has become a vital method to promote and inform outsiders of their natural advantages.

Logically, most observers would expect better web presence from the business sector in a rural community because they recognize the comparative advantage of cheap advertising mediums such as internet sites. In addition local economic forces have a vested interest in promoting their town and have as an additional advantage access from the parent institutional body (Arizona Chamber of Commerce) who is able to provide technical expertise in the same manner that the League of Arizona Cities and Towns does for rural government. The question is, “Do they indeed use this communication medium to its potential?”

The Research

We will assume the first source of information about rural communities with respect to Arizona modern day senior immigrants, particularly the baby boomers will look for will probably be over the internet. “First impressions are lasting impressions,” the sage once said and this initial point of contact between senior and rural community could make a lasting impression that could either hinder or help the development of the local economy.

While no a specific decision making preference may be extrapolated from the following data, rural Arizona's (Chamber of Commerce affiliates) websites were determined to be senior friendly by evaluating on a set of specific criteria that was deemed by previous researchers to be enabling or a hindrance for senior web surfers. All of the Chambers of Commerce chosen had the following characteristics:

- A rural Arizona community with a population of less than 50,000;
- Was not a contiguous part of the greater Phoenix or Tucson metro area even though they could be in the same county;
- Names of affiliates were provided from a list provided by the Arizona Chamber of Commerce.

The second set of criteria this research examined was the web sites themselves. Six categories were evaluated to determine the presence or absence of senior friendly content. They are:

- **Does the host community have a web site?** If the community does not have a web site, they clearly can not communicate with potential migrants.
- **Is the font size adequate size for senior readers?** Size 12 was considered the minimally acceptable font size with 10 adequate. Anything less than 10 was considered small while anything over size 20 was deemed excessive.
- **Are the colors on the web site simple and not distracting for senior readers?** A good rating required use of 3 colors, an adequate rating had 4 and poor rating used 5 or more colors or at the opposite extreme only 2 colors.

- **Does the web site use flash media or movable graphics?** A yes was considered a negative evaluative factor while stationary graphics were considered positive for senior users.
- **How many button choices are available on the community's index page?** A good number of button choices was between 5-10, an adequate selection was 11-12, an excessive number of button choices was 13 and over and a minimal selection of button choices was 4 or less.
- **Did the community's index page have a topical link to Senior interests?** A yes was considered a positive feature while a no was considered a negative feature of the web site.

The following are the results from the data gathered:

Presence of Web Site

- 55 % of rural chambers do not have web sites (45);
- 45 % of rural chambers have web sites (37).

Font Size

- 68 % of the chambers with web sites have font that are a good size for Senior Surfers;
- 32 % of the communities with web sites have font that is too small a size for Senior Surfers;

Color Simplicity

- 62% of web sites have color schemes good for Senior Surfers (3 colors);
- 38% of web sites have color schemes that are poor for Senior Surfers (2 only or 5 + colors).

Presence of Flash Media or Moving Graphics

- 22% of web sites use Flash Media or Movable Graphics;
- 78% of web sites do not use Flash Media or Movable Graphics.

Button Choices

- 86% of web sites have a good selection of button choices for Senior Surfers (5-10);
- 14% of web sites have an excessive selection of button choices for Senior Surfers (over 12).

Topical Links

- 3 % of the opening page for web sites have topical links directly related to Senior Interests (1) ;
- 97 % of opening page web sites do not have topical links directly related to Senior Interests (36).

Overall

- 55 % of Arizona's rural Chambers of Commerce have no web site;
- 30% of rural Chambers of Commerce have web sites that are rated poor in 3 or more categories for Senior Surfers, an inadequate rating;
- 37% of rural Chambers of Commerce have web sites that are rated good in 3 or more categories, a functional rating;
- 33% of rural Chambers of Commerce have web sites that are rated good in 4 or more categories, a good rating;
- **Only 1% of Arizona's rural Chambers of Commerce have web sites rated Senior Friendly.**

Conclusion

In an interesting paradox the economic forces that have the most to gain from the promotion of the community performed even worse than their respective governments in the quality and general presence of web technology. Although many would criticize performance for both to be dismal, rural government exceeded local Chambers overall senior friendly designation 6% to 1%. Indeed, in general presence alone, rural communities far outdistanced their respective local businesses by a nearly 2 to 1 margin.

This enigmatic behavior of economic actors provides few answers to explain the outcome of this research. Certainly the technology is available. Expertise is a phone call away. Why then is there not a concerted marketing effort aimed at the segment of the population with the most disposable income but general lack of web presence at all among rural Arizona's Chambers of Commerce?

The answer lies in further research. While quantitative methods such as those used in this survey explain relationships of one variable to another, they do little to

explain the ‘why’ of those relationships. It is therefore equally important to use all the tools available in the researcher’s toolbox to get at the answers that will provide satisfactory explanations. What may seem rational on the surface to some may seem ludicrous to others. It is therefore imperative if this research is to advance to employ qualitative techniques such as interviewing, focus groups, etc. to get a better understanding of why this technology is largely absent from Arizona’s rural communities.

References

1. Brown, H. (2000). Accessibility and Usability of Information Technology by the Elderly [online]. Available: <http://www.otal.umd.edu/UUGuide/hbrowne/>. Date of access: December 2, 2003.
2. World Wide Web Consortium. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0. May, 1999. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>. Date of access: : December 2, 2003
3. Collins, M. (2003). A Survey of Arizona’s Rural Community Web Sites [online]. Available: <http://my.asu.edu/TWC501>

Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Ajo	N					
Alpine	N					
Apache Junction	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Ash Fork	Y	Good	Poor	No	Excessive	No
Benson-San Pedro Valley	Y	Good	Poor	No	Excessive	No
Bisbee	Y	Small	Good	No	Excessive	No
Black Canyon City	N					
Bouse	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Bowie	N					
Buckeye	Y	Good	Good	No	Excessive	No
Bullhead City	N					
Camp Verde	N					
Case Grande	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Chino Valley	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Chloride	N					
Clarkdale	N					
Congress	N					
Coolidge	N					
Dolan Springs	N					
Douglas	N					
Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Eager/Round Valley	N					
Ehrenberg	N					
Elfrida/Sulphur Springs	N					
Elgin/Sonoita	N					
Eloy	N					
Florence	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Fort Mohave	Y	Small	Good	No	Good	No
Fredonia	N					
Gila Bend	N					
Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Golden Valley	N					
Gold Road/Oatman	N					
Graham County	Y	Good	Good	Yes	Good	No
Green Valley	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Greenlee County	N					
Greer (Pinetop/Lakeside)	N					
Heber (Overgaard)	N					
Holbrook	Y	Small	Minimal	No	Good	No
Jerome	Y					
Joseph City	N					
Kearny	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Kingman	Y	Small	Good	No	Good	No
Lake Havasu City	Y	Small	Good	Yes	Good	No

Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Mammoth	N					
Maricopa/Western Pinal	N					
Mayer	N					
Miami (Greater Globe)	N					
Nogales (Santa Cruz)	N					
Oatman (Gold Road)	N					
Oracle (Smor)	N					
Oro Valley	N					
Overgaard (Heber)	N					
Page (Lake Powell)	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Parker	Y	Small	Poor	No	Excessive	No
Payson	Y	Small	Good	No	Good	No
Pearce (Sunsites)	N					
Pima	Y	Good	Good	Yes	Good	No
Pine/Strawberry	N					
Pinetop/Lakeside	Y	Good	Poor	No	Good	No
Prescott	Y	Good	Poor	Yes	Good	No
Prescott Valley	Y	Small	Poor	No	Good	No
Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Quartzite	Y	Good	Poor	Yes	Good	No
St. Johns	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Salome (McMullen Valley)	Y	Good	Poor	No	Good	No
San Manuel (SMOR)	N					
Sedona - Oak Creek	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Seligman	N					
Show Low	Y	Good	Poor	No	Good	No
Sierra Vista	Y	Small	Good	Yes	Good	No
Snowflake (Taylor)	N					
Sonoita - Elgin	N					
Springerville (Round Valley)	N					
Superior	N					
Thatcher (Graham County)	Y	Good	Good	Yes	Good	No
Tombstone	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Tonto Basin	N					
Tubac	Y	Small	Poor	Yes	Good	No
Valle Grand	N					
Verde Valley (Cottonwood)	Y	Good	Good	Yes	Good	No
Wickenburg	Y	Good	Good	No	Good	No
Willcox	Y	Good	Poor	No	Good	Yes
Location of Chamber	Web Site	Font Size	Color Simplicity	Flash Media	Button Choices	Topical Links
Williams (Grand Canyon)	Y	Small	Poor	No	Good	No
Winslow	N					