Starting Over:
Giving Your Magazine an Online Makeover

Rachel Coker and Martha Terry, Binghamton University • May 2010
Before our makeover, we were like the frumpy girl at the beginning of “What Not to Wear.” We had a closet full of clothes, but nothing that looked fresh or made us feel good.

We were also maintaining two separate websites, one for our research newsletter and another for our annual research magazine. And while both may once have been stylish, neither had seen a significant update in about five years.
Group offers new perspective on decision-making

A team of Binghamton researchers who study the collective dynamics of complex systems recently received a $550,000, three-year National Science Foundation grant to support a project focused on an evolutionary perspective on decision-making.

Piling on the homework: Does it work for everyone?

When it comes to math, piling on the homework may not work for all students. That's the finding of a new study authored by Daniel Henderson, associate professor of economics at Binghamton University, and colleagues at the University of Nevada.

Researcher seeks to understand corrosion

A Binghamton University researcher hopes to shed light on why and how metals suffer corrosion, especially when under various types of stress. Guangwen Zhou will use state-of-the-art techniques involving transmission electron microscopy, or TEM, to observe the oxidation process.

NSF grant boosts Evolutionary Studies

A new National Science Foundation grant will bring national attention to Binghamton University's evolutionary studies program. EvoS will serve as a model for a national consortium that will link institutions ranging from major research universities to community colleges in a partnership of programs. The two-year, $300,000 NSF grant is titled “Expanding Evolutionary Studies in American Higher Education.”
Sound strategy
Composer Paul Goldst dumpsters his creative process. More...

Partnering with parents
Nurse on a mission to rescue childhood. More...

Complex systems
Complexity science offers a framework for solving today's most vexing problems. More...

Industry allies
The Center of Excellence turns corporate partners into catalysts for discovery. More...

Stories
The Parkinson's predicament
Merchants, moneylenders and middlemen
Earnest money
Search smarts
Cultivating entrepreneurs
Whole lot of shaking going on
Aging gracefully
A new dream for 21st-century science
What was wrong with our sites?

• We were too rigid (chronological list of stories, with no way to emphasize one as more important than another).

• There were no entry points aside from the headlines.

• We weren’t capitalizing on the excellent work done by the campus photographer.

• There was no easy way to post photos or videos.

• The online version of the magazine offered nothing different than you could find in the print edition. The website was simply an expression of the print product.

We knew we needed to get a good haircut and buy a few new outfits, at the very least.
Why redesign? How often do I need to do this?

Every two to four years is one guideline we’ve heard. But start by giving yourselves a look in the “three-way mirror.” Does your site still look good? Is it still serving your needs and the needs of your visitors? How does it compare to the sites you consider your peers?
We saw a 20 percent increase in unique visitors from mid-2008 to mid-2009. Why mess with success? We knew we could do better. We decided that we wanted to do a better job of reaching the public, not just our faculty and researchers at other institutions. So we started to think about how we should look and what we should offer as a news site.
We made a list of things that our new site should have and should allow visitors to do, and that list became our set of guiding principles for the redesign.

- News stories
- Slide shows or image galleries
- Videos
- Faculty spotlights
- Easy sharing via e-mail and sites like Facebook
- A “most popular” list
- Search function
- Subscription button
- Comments section
- RSS feed
- The ability to schedule stories for future publication

That’s when we knew we were ready for a dramatic makeover, not just a new pair of shoes.
Keeping it familiar

The new site needed to feel like part of the family that also includes our print magazine. We drew inspiration from the magazine’s TOC when designing the landing page of Discover-e. The magazine banner and new Discover-e banner have a similar feel.

Web-friendly font families were selected to match the serif and sans-serif fonts used in the print version.
Going shopping

Next, we developed three possible designs and showed them to several small groups to gauge their reactions.
feature

New center to focus on solar energy
Federal representatives visited Binghamton University this week to announce $4 million in funding for the University’s Center for Autonomous Solar Power. Read more

faculty spotlight

Working toward ‘greener’ computers
Binghamton researcher Qnru Qiu has received the NSF’s most prestigious award for young faculty. Her work may lead to smaller computers that function more efficiently and use less power. Read more

photo galleries

blog

what's on your mind?

news

Computer scientist earns prestigious NSF grant
Research at Binghamton University will help to harness the power of cloud computing, resulting in lower costs for businesses and revolutionizing everyday tasks such as shopping and browsing the Web. Read more

Professor in spotlight with first novel for adults
Liz Rosenberg, a poet and children’s book author who teaches English at Binghamton University, has written her first book for adults. Read more

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video

Professor Goldstaub explains his creative process Watch
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Liz Rosenberg, a poet and children's book author who teaches English at Binghamton University, has written her first book for adults.

University earns AAHRPP accreditation

Binghamton University has earned accreditation for its Human Subjects Protection program from the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs Inc.

Professor's technology outsmarts Google

Binghamton's Weiyi Meng has pioneered metasearch-engine technology that harnesses the power of small search engines to come up with results that are more accurate and more complete than Google's.

Nurse-educator focuses on helping parents

Mechanical engineer receives first patent

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A winning look

One design was the clear favorite, though the banner from another design was so well-liked that we experimented with a hybrid.
Magazine banner and Discover-e banner needed to have a similar/familiar look.

Circles from the magazine’s TOC are reflected in the design of Discover-e.
Political scientist named Kissinger Scholar

A Binghamton University researcher hopes to provide new insights into American foreign policy in the early 1960s by examining a year's worth of research at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Benjamin Forthman, professor and head of the university's politics department, was recently named a Henry Kissinger Scholar for the 2010-2011 school year.

The government-sponsored position, awarded to one person per year, will support Forthman as he spends 10 months in residence at the Library using its materials for his research. He hopes to gather information for a book.

"I'm really interested in the ways that domestic, political, and economic considerations influence foreign policy decisions," Forthman said. "I want to do research on the idea of the United States as a world power and the politics of that process -- who supported the expansion of American foreign policy interests and who opposed it and why?"

Forthman plans to divide his research into two parts. He will first examine manuscripts, books and periodicals written between 1930 and 1945 to get a feel for the public policy of that period.

"I want to look at letters of the people involved in the process to get a sense of how they understood the expanding economic interests of the U.S. and the start of the Cold War," he said.

He then will gather data about the United States during that period -- very important exports, congressional support and opposition and domestic economic interests -- to obtain an understanding of the country's Cold War economics.

"The rise of the U.S. as a world power is a puzzle in some ways, because the U.S. became very powerful economically before it took on an expanded role in the world," Forthman said. "Thus foreign policy decisions were behind the military power that was necessary to implement them."

An area that Forthman plans to study is why the United States felt it was in the economic market with nations ranging from controlling its defense through investments.

Forthman said he benefited from the opportunity to research American foreign policy during World War I and the Cold War.

Gordon Streit, director of the office of scholarly programs at the Library of Congress, said Kissinger Scholars are selected for the position by a small committee in the library. She said Forthman was chosen based on the strength of his proposal and the amount of related materials available at the Library.

"Forthman's proposal was very informative and original," she said. "I think it's going to be a good fit for him and the library, and the value is his research of having an extended period of research time as an excellent library," she said.

The program is underwritten by funds and donations of Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state who received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for his foreign relations efforts during the Vietnam War.

Comments section
The right fit makes all the difference

This is no less true for the content management system than it would be for a bra! Our resident IT expert – and we do think it’s vital to have one, if at all possible – started looking into the platforms used by news websites. **WordPress** quickly emerged as the winner.

**Among its best features:**

- It’s free for non-profits and open source.
- There’s an active community of developers working to improve it.
- It’s already the platform of choice for numerous successful sites, including CNN, the New York Times and other news organizations, as well as many government agencies, including the CIA.
- It’s incredibly flexible. As a content management system, it’s the most popular choice for bloggers. But the power of that system allows you to do a lot more than run a blog.
Ability to schedule stories for future publication
The newsletter

One exciting aspect of the new design was that it could be applied to the look of our e-mail newsletter as well. We rely on the newsletter, sent once or twice a month, to drive additional traffic to the website when new items are posted.

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How long did all this take?

The women on “What Not to Wear” get a new look in just a few days. This process took us about seven months, from the initial meetings of our small team to the day when we switched the site over to the new look.
Does this make me look fat?

Not everything you try on looks good, of course. We did have our share of struggles.

• We encountered numerous browser issues. The site would look good in Internet Explorer but weird in Firefox and so forth.

• The designers’ expectations vs. the limitations of the Web.

• The consultant’s workflow vs. our hopes for a speedy launch. (He was based in Australia, which made communication even more challenging at times.)

• Moving the entire set of legacy files over to the new database. (Thank God for graduate students!)
Compare the appearance on two different platforms and browsers in various ways.

Shown is the onion skin view option. Also available 1-up view or 2-up view.
What did it cost?

Our budget was smaller — MUCH smaller — than the $5,000 they give women on “What Not to Wear.”

We spent $550 on an outside WordPress expert. (Quotes ranged from that on up to more than $3,000.)

Our team did the rest!
Showing off your new look

- We sent an e-mail to our electronic newsletter’s mailing list about a month after the “soft launch” of the site.

- We spent about $500 on mugs with a quote about discovery and the division’s logo. These have been used as gifts for people who subscribe to the electronic newsletter at conventions, trade shows and so forth.

- We spent another $250 on large postcards that were mailed to all faculty and staff to promote the new site.
Unique page views were up 95 percent in the first quarter of 2010 compared to the first quarter of 2009. We’re also building our list of subscribers for the e-newsletter. It grew about 20 percent in the first quarter.

We haven’t yet seen many comments on the stories, which is a bit of a disappointment. Still, it has only been a few months since we launched the new site. We may make a special push for readers to tell us what they think in the months ahead.
Beauty secrets

These are just a few of the resources we consulted during this project.

**Dead trees:**

*Don’t Make Me Think* by Steve Krug

*The Web Designer’s Idea Book* by Patrick McNeil

*Learning Web Design* by Jennifer Niederst Robbins

**Pixels:**

https://browserlab.adobe.com

WordPress.com
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