

mStoner@mStoner.com

www.mStoner.com

www.mStonerblog.com

1800 W. Larchmont, Suite 310 Chicago IL 60613

V. 773.305.0537

F. 773.404.2921

Box 171, Woodstock VT 05091

V. 802.457.2889

F. 802.457.9234

mStoner

smart, sustainable solutions

Reprint

Just Call Them Visitors!

By Michael Stoner

If I could make one change in the way all our clients think about websites, it would be to eradicate the term “user.” As in “the users of our website.” People use machines. People use computers. People use software. When you “use” something, aren’t you engaging in a largely mechanical interaction? Is “using” software an enjoyable experience? Not usually: it’s frustrating and occasionally stupefying.

People don’t “use” websites, they “visit” them. So just call them visitors, please, and design websites to make visitors feel welcome, to help them find what they want, and to delight them.

People visit websites to learn something, or to do something that’s important to them. It’s not about the way the site looks, but about making sure that it’s built from the ground up to facilitate your visitors achieving their objectives. Note the emphasis: it’s all about *them* and what they want.

In the process, of course, you want them to take actions that are important to you and to your organization. To join, to give, to apply, to visit, to register: actions that ultimately fulfill *your* mission. An effective site will do this not by trapping visitors, but by helping answer their questions until they’re ready to take action—actions that are important to them, and to you.

That’s why the biggest challenge in designing a website is not to make it look appealing, but to think carefully about what visitors want to learn and what actions are important to them. The most important question is: What do your visitors care about?

Let’s take a simple scenario: a teenager visiting a college website for the first time. It may seem to many people that this particular kind of visitor would want bright colors, lots of moving “stuff” like Flash animations (which, in the mind of many passes for interactivity), or the ability to sign up to get something that meets your needs—like an email newsletter that tells them how great you are or a personalized website that is really designed to capture information about them so you can market to them.

If you’ve read other issues of Intelligence, heard me speak, or taken a look at our blog, you know that we happen to believe that this is precisely NOT what this particular visitor wants from a first or second visit to a college website. She wants specific kinds of information--Do you have

This is a reprint from our email newsletter Intelligence formatted for print. For a subscription, email us at mStoner@mStoner.com.

Contents © mStoner 2006. All rights reserved.

my major? How much does it cost? What's the school like?--and she wants it fast. No Flash, not too many big images, not a lot of confusing choices. Instead, a clearly organized website with content that's easy to find and browse.

Here's a simple premise that underlies a lot of our work: If visitors find what they're looking for, they'll be back. If not, they won't return--and they'll never sign up for personalized web pages or email newsletters, read your blogs, or explore all the other clever stuff you've designed to make your site sticky for all the users you hope to attract. Colleges who understand that do better at helping convert visitors to their websites to visitors to their physical campus, where the real sale takes place.

For other kinds of organizations, such as nonprofits, the same philosophy applies: understanding the kinds of actions your visitors to your website want to take--and facilitating those actions--will help you to fulfill your own organizational mission.

Users vs. Visitors. This isn't semantics. It's about attitude! I believe that websites created to welcome visitors and to help them find what they're looking for--and to take action--are inherently better than those created for "users." So let's call them visitors, and let's treat them that way.