Deep Creek Lake Communications

(PLV: 12/6/2010)

Introduction

One of the results of the Dec 3, 2010, workshop is that communicating to the general public the scientific and legal information about Deep Creek Lake is inadequate and that it could be approved greatly. Various organizations have attacked this issue but so far without great success. This note suggests another approach to solving this communications problem.

In the workshop someone coined the word "Deep Creek Institute" I like the connotation associated with this phrase and will use it here to connote the communications approach.

Approach

When people seek information it's typically put in the form of a question. For example: one might ask : "Where can I…" or "How can I…" What should I…" or "Do you know about…", or "Am I allowed to…", etc.

This suggests that one should organize the information in terms of questions, and have appropriate answers to them.

Most people would want a simple to understand answer, basically a paragraph. Some people would want much more; they want to delve into the detail.

This suggests that the answer to a question must have at least two components, one a simple answer, the other a detailed answer. The latter is probably best accomplished by sending the inquisitor to the specific places that provide the foundation of the answer to the question.

For anything to be effective to the general public things must be kept simple. These days, almost everyone has access to the Internet. Pretty much everyone can navigate with a browser. However, the degree of sophistication of working with these browsers very greatly from user to user.

This therefore points to using the Internet to communicate with the public at large.

Our target audience must be assumed to comprise every level of sophistication. We must therefore target old machines with old browsers, and people with the most up-to-date hardware and software.

Most people don't know how to type, hence a multiple choice (or point and click) option must be provided in addition to the standard Google-like or Yahoo-like search box.

All of the above suggests:

1. A simple website
2. A dedicated website
3. Organization of the information in terms of questions
4. Point-and-click and search box interface
5. Simple answers to questions
6. Links to detailed answers to the questions

The next element of this communication issue is how to define the question itself.

There or probably thousands of question, several of which might have the same answer. Ideally one would collect these questions from people, but that would require an immense effort. Hence an approach where one can develop a set of question from a limited number of people and a way to solicit questions from others (visitors to the website) needs to be considered.

One approach might be to enable the website for people to pose a question in several different ways, let the website search for a possible answer by listing possible alternative questions for which answers already exist. If an answer does not exist, then there should be a facility that can provide an answer within a short period of time.

Use

How might such a website work?

I see the following types of scenarios.

Scenario 1 - Using a Point-and Click Interface

A person with a question gets to the home page of "Deep Creek Lake Institute." Based on the question in the users head, the user points and clicks to menu items and may traverse several pages before winding up with a list of possible questions. If one is found then clicking on that question will bring up the relevant information for that question. That may include a list of other related questions. Problem solved.

If no applicable question is found, the site may recommend some alternative questions or categories to pursue. Otherwise the use has to backup and pursue another path.

Scenario 2 - Search Box Interface

A person with a question types in terms that are relevant to its question, just like one types in a Google or Yahoo type of search box. A list of possible questions is provided from which the user can select one. If one is found then clicking on that question will bring up the relevant information for that question. That may include a list of other related questions. Problem solved.

If no applicable question is found, the site may recommend some alternative questions or categories to pursue or the user may provide a different set of keywords in the search box.

Scenario 3 - No Question and Answer Found

On a separate web page the user can pose his or her question and some other explanation of the question, and ask for an answer. The user will also be asked to provide the category names that this question should belong to and leave an email address for further contact.

This information is sent to the person responsible to coordinated the activities for the categories listed and finds the answers by whatever processes are in place. The information is entree into the database. An email is sent to the use with the link to the answer to the question.

Scenario 4 - Wrong Answer or Incomplete Answer Found

A person searching and getting an answer may believe that it is wrong, incomplete, or that there are other solutions. A user shod be allowed to voice their opinion, perhaps along the lines of a post related to that question which is visible to all users arriving at that question. Such an answer should be filtered by the site/category administrator, so that an appropriate comment can also be listed.

How Implemented

This is a relatively straightforward relational database and web-design project. All of the technologies are easily implemented. The following is a possible solution setup.

The Database

A database is made up of tables; a table is made up of fields. There are basically four related tables in the database:

1. A table that contains the questions (Note: multiple forms of questions may have the same answer set)
2. A table that contains answers to questions (Note: each answer is unique)

3. A table that contains the links to details relevant to a question (Note: the same detail may be relevant to the same question)
4. A table that contains the history of usage of the questions (Note: statistical usage information can be generated from this database)

Somewhere information needs to be stored as to:

1. Who has worked on providing the answers to the questions
2. Who has validated the answer
3. In what categories does a question belong to
4. The date that the answer to the question was generated and updated
5. Was the answer satisfactory

I'm sure that there will be some additional pieces of information desired, but they will come about when more thought is put into the design of the database.

Additional thoughts.

1. As listed above, validating an answer provided by someone is important from a quality control point of view. The validator can be anyone, and the question listed on the website should indicate the status of the validation. Perhaps more than one validation should be allowed, which means perhaps that each question should have a validation count.
2. This project could be located at Garrett College and students could provide some of the initial entries, or verify some of the answers, as part of some of their class work, or perhaps paid work. This would be the "Deep Creek Lake Institute."
3. Perhaps the two-level of answers approach should be augmented by an optional third. The third level falls in between the simple answer and the pointers to the detailed information. This third level might represent viewpoints and interpretations from experts that believe that they have a point to make.
4. There should be feedback allowed to suggest website improvements.
5. One could have a separate page with unanswered questions for which public input is requested.