

5-2012

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Recommended Citation

Tato, Gabriella and Ponelis, Shana R., "Evaluating Diplomatic Missions' Websites: A Case Study of South Africa in the United States" (2012). *MWAIS 2012 Proceedings*. 3.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/mwais2012/3>

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Evaluating diplomatic missions' websites: a case study of South Africa in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Diplomatic missions have dual roles: providing government services to citizens abroad as well as marketing their countries for tourism and trade and investment purposes. A website is a vital channel for marketing and dissemination of information for diplomatic missions. Ensuring good usability and a consistent global brand is particularly important. Good usability ensures that the content and user interface is easy for visitors to understand and use and supports consistent branding. The purpose of this study was to use the websites of South African diplomatic missions in the United States to illustrate the need for an evaluative framework and guidelines in order to support good usability as well as consistent branding. Since no framework specifically aimed for the evaluation of diplomatic missions' websites exist, aesthetic and informative evaluation measures based on Han and Mills' online promotion instrument were used. The study found that each of the four websites have elements in common but that there is room for improvement both at an individual and collective level to improve the visual experience and the associated perception of the reliability and trustability of information presented to both user groups of the websites. The results illustrate the need for a framework adapted to the dual roles of diplomatic missions in general that can be used as basis for government guidelines whilst allowing some flexibility to meet local needs and requirements. The study provides an initial framework that can be used to assess diplomatic mission websites and can be further developed in future research to complement e-government research.

Keywords: diplomatic mission, consulate, embassy, website, usability, evaluation, web design, South Africa, United States

INTRODUCTION

According to Article 3 of the *Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1961)* (United Nations, 2005) the functions of a diplomatic mission include: representing the sending state in the receiving state; protecting the interests of the sending state and its nationals in the receiving state within the limits permitted by international law; negotiating with the government of the receiving state; ascertaining by all lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state, which is reported to the government of the sending state; promoting friendly relations between the sending and receiving states; and developing economic, cultural and scientific relations. Foreign embassies and consulates have lost much of their role in decision-making and information gathering as a result of decreasing communication costs (Rose, 2007) and as a result diplomatic missions are increasingly focusing on developing economic relations, particularly export promotion, in addition to the regular consular and visa services. Van Bergeijk *et al.* (2007) found positive and highly significant effects for embassies' contribution to bilateral trade but mixed results for other types of representation such as consulates. Rose (2007) found that, although consulates have smaller effects than that of an embassy, bilateral exports rise by approximately six to ten percent for each additional consulate abroad.

Over the past decade the web has had far reaching implications on the way in which information is shared, and services are rendered by both public and private organizations. In the information age, a website is a vital channel to market and disseminate information. Given the information-intensive nature of the functions of diplomatic missions a website is instrumental to supporting the mandate of diplomatic missions in the receiving state by providing information to their main market segments: citizens in need of consular services and/or interested in country-related events in the region and individuals and businesses in the region interested in travel, education, cultural exchange, trade and investment and/or country-related events in the region.

Ensuring good usability and a consistent global brand (Erkollar and Oberer, 2010) is important for both the sending state and the diplomatic missions. The 'comfortableness' of using a website has a positive correlation with the perceived quality of the destination represented (Mills and Morrison, 2003). One way of assessing 'comfortableness' is to assess the usability of a website. Usability is a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use (Nielsen, 2003). The usability of a website plays a key role in ascertaining the success of a website, as it determines the quality of the user's experience while navigating and interacting with a website; clear, consistent and easily navigable websites that are flexible without creating confusing results are the ideal; this is particularly true of government websites where the focus should be on providing users

with the most efficient interface to meet their specific information needs. There are several benefits to ensuring good usability such as improved brand image, positive word of mouth, and reduced telephonic inquiries. On the other hand, if a website is hard to navigate or gives visitors problems, it can result in the loss of additional visits and in a loss of credibility, reliability and trust in the information and destination. Some common problem areas for website usability include out of date information, confusing navigation, requiring a long time to accomplish tasks, difficulty to comprehend the interface quickly, difficulty to remember the interface on return visits, slow download times for pictures and graphics and frequent errors. The goals of evaluating usability are to inform future design decisions and to eliminate design problems and sources of user frustrations, if any, in order to improve overall user satisfaction.

The primary purpose of this paper is to illustrate the need for an evaluative framework and guidelines in order to support good usability as well as consistent branding since no framework specifically aimed for the evaluation of diplomatic missions' websites exist. A secondary purpose was to evaluate, compare and to make recommendations to improve the visual experience and thus the associated perception of the reliability and trustability of information presented to users on the websites, both individually and collectively, of each of the US-based South African diplomatic missions' websites. To this end, the paper is structured as follows: first an overview of the selected cases is presented followed by a discussion of the analytical framework used. The results are presented followed by analysis and recommendations. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

CASE STUDY: SOUTH AFRICAN DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States of America (US) the Government of the Republic of South Africa is represented by the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. with Consulate Generals located in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. The Consulate Generals focus on dealing with individual persons and businesses and serve as representatives of the embassy in locations outside of the capital city. Each of the four locations has states and territories allocated as its regional responsibilities. The Consulate Generals endeavors to foster trade with and travel to South Africa and to take care of South Africans abroad in their respective regions.

Websites are instrumental to supporting the mandate of these South African missions in the US. South African diplomatic missions have the right to establish their own websites according to their own needs and resources but establishing a website requires agreement from the *Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO)*. The head of the diplomatic mission is responsible for contents and maintenance and website-related costs are to be covered by the diplomatic mission's own budget. There are no requirements other than having the ministers' photos and a welcome message from the head of the mission. Each of the 4 locations thus has their own website that addresses their specific needs and is maintained by each location independently from one another.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Kurosu and Kashimura (1995) and Tractinsky (1997) found a high correlation between the perceived aesthetics of a user interface and the *a priori* perceived ease of use. Perceived aesthetics and attractiveness of a website depends on many aspects and is subjective but there are aspects and conventions that can be used to evaluate the perceived aesthetics of a first impression made by a website. Although there isn't an instrument specifically focused on embassy and consular websites and e-government assessment focus primarily on inward facing websites for use by citizens residing within a state, instruments that evaluate outward facing tourism-related websites have been developed. Since promoting tourism is part of the function of diplomatic missions the evaluation measures used in this study were based on an evaluation instrument developed by Han and Mills (2006) focusing on the aesthetic and informative categories. The aspects evaluated and compared with respect to aesthetic web design were the interface (layout placement, layout and text colors, images and graphical elements) and navigation (URL, main navigation, search bar, number of links in the main menu, menu link frequency). In terms of informative content the homepage, consular services, tourism, and investment & trade were evaluated. For greatest consistency, one of the authors conducted the evaluation and comparison. The results of the evaluation and comparison are presented in the next section.

RESULTS

Aesthetic web design

Interface design

Overall, the four South African Consulate General websites are divided in terms of layout design and color usage, though they are all unified in their placement of the South African flag and coat of arms, the placement of their respective consulate

names, and the color of the body text (black). All four of the consulate websites show consistency in their choice of layout structure – a three-column “fixed” template. Background color varies between the sites as is evident in Figure 1.

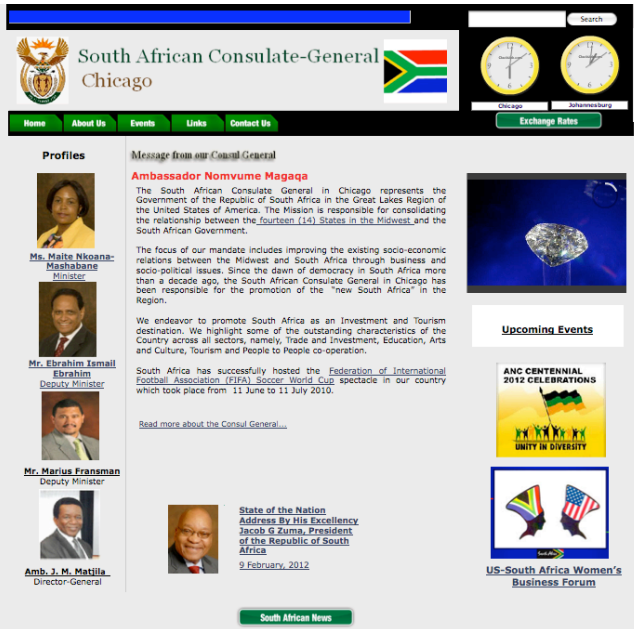
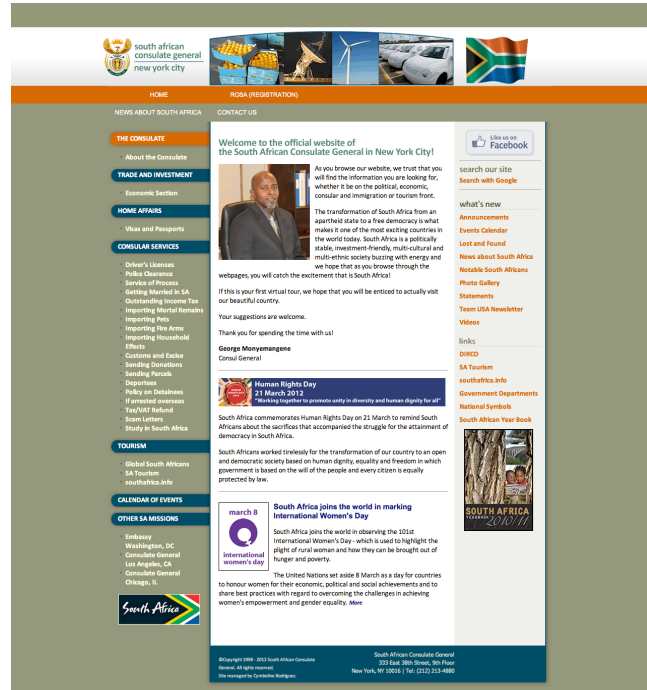


Figure 1: Homepages of the South African diplomatic missions in the US (clockwise from top left Washington, DC; New York, NY; Los Angeles, CA, Chicago, IL)

Web URL & Site Navigation

The URLs of the websites are inconsistent and not memorable for users: Chicago, IL is www.sachicago.pwpsystems.com, Los Angeles, CA www.link2southafrica.com, New York, NY www.southafrica-newyork.net, and Washington, DC saembassy.ogt11.com. The main navigation style and options (horizontal or vertical, drop-down or none) and the use of a search bar varies between the four South African Consulate sites. Two of the sites opt for a search and horizontal navigation

combination and the other two rely more heavily on vertical sidebar navigation. The four consulate websites also contrast in the number and types of links provided in their respective navigation bars. For example, the Los Angeles and New York websites have a greater number of menu links (roughly 10-17) than the other two South African consulate websites. In contrast, the Washington D.C. and Chicago missions have the same number of links (5) in their main navigation bar, but the types of links differ as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Washington D.C. navigation bar (top) and Chicago navigation bar (bottom)

Overall, “Consular Affairs/Visa and Passports,” “About the embassy,” and “Contact us” are the most commonly used link titles, appearing on three of the four different South African consulate websites. Two out of the four websites shared “events,” “links,” “tourism,” “news,” “other services,” and “home” links in common.

A summary of the evaluation of the interface design and site navigation is presented in Table 1.

Interface design	Layout Placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1¹ out of 4 (LA) of the site layouts are aligned to the left; the other three (DC, Ch, NY) are centered
	Layout and Text Colors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 out of 4 (LA, NY) have a background color other than grey or white, 1 out of 4 (Ch) uses a grey background, and 1 out of 4 (DC) has a white background. All 4 South African websites use black text for the content.
	Images and Graphical Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The South African flag and coat of arms is visible at the very top of all consulate-general sites. Specifically, the coat of arms is always on the left hand side, and the flag is always on the left. All sites have the consulate name and respective locations at the very top of the page. 3 out of 4 (Ch, DC, NY) feature a photo or photos of consulate officials on the main page.
Site navigation	URL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no consistencies between URLs with no naming conventions to promote familiarity.
	Main Navigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 out of 4 (LA, NY) rely primarily on a vertical navigation bar on the main consulate page. The other two (DC, Ch) rely more on a horizontal navigation bar. 2 out of 4 (Ch, DC) use drop down menus.
	Search Bar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 out of 4 (Ch, DC) have a search bar. Both place the search bar on the upper right-hand side of the page.

Table 1: Summary of aesthetic evaluation²

Content

Main Page

The four consulate web sites are generally divided on the type of content that is included on their respective main pages. Three of the four consulate web sites include a newsfeed, and/or feature a cause or causes; however, the placement of these

¹ Note about New York Consulate Web Site: The South African Consulate - New York web site’s main page is a gateway page. Its services are divided into three separate sites: South African Consulate General; Consular: Visa, Passports, and Immigration; and Permanent Missions of South Africa to the United Nations. To obtain more accurate statistics, information is gathered from the New York consulate website’s “South African Consulate General” section only.

² Inferential statistics did not yield satisfactorily meaningful results because most of the tables had cells of expected counts of less than five. Therefore, the interpretation of results is based on raw data and descriptive statistics.

contents varies to a degree between the web sites. At least one of the four web sites includes their respective embassy's address and phone number (NY), as well as South African branding and cultural information (DC). The majority of the SA consulate web sites include a welcome statement of some kind, always in the center column.

The following are some specific observations:

- 3 out of 4 (NY, DC, Ch) include a welcome statement from their respective ambassador.
- 3 out of 4 (NY, Ch, DC) include a newsfeed or announcements page of some kind. Two provide a link to announcements (NY, Ch), while the other (DC) has the latest news topics in the right hand column on the main page.
- 2 out of 4 (Ch, NY) feature specific causes or events somewhere on their main page.
- 1 out of 4 (NY) includes their respective embassy's address and phone number.
- 1 out of 4 (DC) includes branding and cultural information in a left-hand column.

Consular Services

The majority of the websites link directly to the New York mission page on visas and passports. The Chicago branch does include some on-site information, but also links to the New York mission site for visa and passport information and the South African portal site for other services.

Tourism

The Los Angeles consulate website provides a few general tips or an overview of traveling within South Africa, dividing information into sections, such as "travel agents," or "frequently asked questions," which, when clicked, lead the visitor off-site, with frequent links directly to the SouthAfrica.net tourism website (<http://www.southafrica.net>). The Washington D.C. and New York missions both include a small section for off site tourism links in the left-hand column of their respective main pages.

Investment & Trade

Aside from Washington, D.C the consulate websites offer a general overview of doing business with South Africa and/or their respective sectors in the United States. The three sites also provide an array of links and information that cover different aspects of trade and investment with South Africa.

The New York consulate offers an in-depth overview of the benefits of doing business with South Africa, highlighting articles from respected media outlets that feature South African economic highlights. The Washington D.C. consulate takes a different approach from the other three consulates, opting instead to give a brief overview of what their representative office for South Africa's Department of Trade and Industry is responsible for, as well as providing contact information.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Aesthetic web design: interface and navigation

All the websites include the South African flag and coat of arms, as well as the consulate name, in the header section of website as the other three SA Consulate websites do, which is good for branding purposes. The four consulate websites also show consistency in choice of layout structure, which creates a more cohesive experience for users, particularly since the consulates frequently link to one another. Other aspects related to layout structure and design of the four South African Consulate General websites vary, such as the page alignment, page colors, and the navigation style. In particular, there is quite a bit of variation between the websites in terms of the amount and types of links that can be found in the main navigation bar. Too many differences between the four consulate websites' navigation can create confusion for users, who may be familiar with one South African consulate website, and find that they have to reconfigure their navigation style when visiting another, which is likely to occur due to the aforementioned frequency in which they link to one another.

The South African Consulate of Chicago website as well as the South African Consulate of Washington D.C. website both have fewer links in the main navigation, which users may find more approachable, as opposed to having an abundance of links that may deter some site visitors who may find it difficult to find what they are seeking. To unify the four United States South African Consulate General websites further as well as help visitors better determine which links in the main navigation bar will provide them their desired content, it may be beneficial to create link headings that are more descriptive or all-encompassing. The New York Consulate website, for example, has an over-abundance of links, but the link titles are more focused and concise, for example 'Visas and Passports'.

Content

Main Page

Certain content elements are shared between two to three of the four consulate websites, such as welcome messages or news feeds. Similar to the differences in interface designs, however, much of the main page content varies between the websites.

The South African Consulate of Chicago website's main page includes a news link, and references to the centenary celebration the ruling party in South Africa, the ANC. Similar content related to South Africa such as the aforementioned helps to create a stronger brand image between the four U.S. South African Consulate websites, as well as better promote news and events related to South Africa itself. A search bar in the top right-hand corner should be implemented in all instances.

Consular Services

Although all of the South African websites link directly to the New York mission for Visa and Passport information, it is advantageous to include more on-site information in regards to visa and passport information. Hypothetically speaking, if the New York Consulate website became unavailable or were under construction, this important information would be unavailable to visitors across the other three South African consulate websites.

Tourism

The South African Consulate of Chicago could choose to place less emphasis on providing tourist information, and simply provide a link to the SouthAfrica.net, similar to the Washington D.C. Consulate website. As with consular services, however, it is always beneficial to provide a general overview of South African tourism or a few quick tips on-site for visitors in addition to a link to the South African tourism portal website.

Trade and Investment

The SA Chicago website provides a quick overview of trade and investment as well as numerous, helpful off-site links, similar to the majority of the SA consulate websites. To enhance and promote this section further, in-depth guides or descriptions of trades could be included on-site. For example, the New York consulate highlights a few benefits of doing business with South Africa in addition to providing off-site links related to trade and investment.

Overall the South African Embassy and Consulate Generals in the US should be commended for the web presence they have established and maintain to provide access to information to their main user groups, tourists, potential investors and South African citizens, with limited resources. However, the analysis of the results from this study show that it would be possible to further enhance the user experience to increase 'comfortableness' if resources were to be available to do so. The websites of South African Embassy and Consulates-General in the US already link to each other but synergies can be further explored. Greater consistency in look-and-feel between the design and layout of the websites can strengthen the South African brand, particularly when cross-linking is used. Following this study, we suggest that the websites of other South African missions across the globe be evaluated and a framework or guidelines be developed for official global use to promote a more user-friendly and consistent online presence. Whilst it is necessary to allow flexibility to cater to the local needs in a particular region or country, it is important to create a consistent brand to promote a unified face to the world and support the mission of DIRCO as well as the South African Government in foreign states.

CONCLUSION

Given the information-intensive nature of the functions of diplomatic missions websites are instrumental to provide information to their main user groups: citizens in need of consular services, and individuals and businesses in the region interested in travel, education, cultural exchange, trade and investment. The above case illustrates that there is a need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to diplomatic missions' websites and that guidelines and/or a framework within which to develop and evaluate such sites for a given country would be beneficial, also to enable comparative research. Therefore we recommend that future research focus on developing a general framework tailored for the evaluation of diplomatic mission websites; one area that in particular deserve attention is trade and investment, particularly since it is a primary focus for many embassies and diplomatic missions but is not usually included within the scope of e-government or tourism-related instruments.

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