

ABSTRACT

WWW.SPEAKTIPS.COM - A WEBSITE DESIGNED TO PROVIDE PUBLIC SPEAKING ARTICLES THROUGH WEEBLY'S CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR THE PURPOSE OF BUILDING A PERSONAL BRAND ONLINE

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This production thesis explores the process of creating a website designed to provide public speaking and personal development articles for online readers. I discuss the 21st century expectation of managing one's online presence and then leverage that presence online through the creation of a personal website designed to display one's knowledge, expertise and career highlights. After describing these 21st century expectations, I then apply the uses and gratifications theory and discuss how web users employ personal websites to enhance knowledge and social interactions. Finally, I describe the process of creating my own personal brand online and use measurable statistics through Weebly Analytics and Twitter to measure content distribution and engagement.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2014

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BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis Director:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am filled with gratitude for all of the individuals who have committed their time, energy, and knowledge to this production thesis. First and foremost, I would like to thank my production thesis committee chair, Dr. David J. Gunkel, for his guidance, support and encouragement during this process. His graduate seminar in communication technology inspired me to further delve into research in the areas of computer-mediated communication, information and communication technology and web design. His research, books and publications are internationally renown in the discipline and I am immensely thankful for the opportunity to learn under his guidance. Next, I am thankful for Dr. Joseph Scudder, who has helped refine my critical thinking skills during my graduate studies. His mentorship and courses have helped lay the groundwork for this project. Finally, I'd like to thank Dr. Richard Holt who constantly inspires me to think outside the box and challenge the status quo. Each one of my committee members has supported, encouraged, and inspired me in ways that I could not have done myself, and for that I am eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a growing number of hiring managers use search engines to research candidates, it is essential for 21st century job seekers to manage their online presence effectively. According to Harris and Rae's (2011) article on social media and personal branding, finding a job increasingly involves an understanding of building a personal brand both online and offline. They further suggest that managing a personal brand online is not only for job seekers, but also for individuals looking to develop their career progression (Harris & Rae, 2011).

Harris and Rae (2011) argue that individuals who do not effectively manage their presence online will lose access to potential career opportunities. Additionally, their research found that "people with the skills, time and confidence to navigate and manage the online chaos will gain access to new career opportunities, find audiences for their work and enrich the lives of others" (Harris & Rae, 2011, p. 17). Furthermore, bestselling author Michael Hyatt (2012) echoes these findings by stating, "Without a platform—something that enables you to get seen and heard—you don't have a chance." Hyatt (2012) further states, "Having an awesome product, an outstanding service, or a compelling cause is no longer enough." Both Harris and Rae (2011) and Michael Hyatt (2012) convincingly argue that individuals must first, actively manage their online presence and second, utilize the Internet to build their own personal brand.

According to survey research by market research company AYTm, 56% of all hiring managers are more impressed by a candidate's personal website than any other personal branding tool, but only 7% of current job seekers actually have a personal website (Handell, 2014). In addition, Smith (2013) explains that 80% of job openings are never advertised and the average number of people who apply for a position is 118 and only 20% of those applicants even get an interview. Based on AYTm's research and Harris and Rae's (2011) article, it is prudent and increasingly necessary for job seekers to manage their online social presence by creating personal websites.

This production thesis intends to explore the process of creating a personal website on Weebly's content management system for the purpose of creating a personal brand. As a theme, I focused primarily on public speaking and presentation tips as I drew from my career in marketing and teaching public speaking.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Theory

This production thesis explores the uses and gratifications theory introduced by Blumler and Katz (1974) as a primer for understanding why web users employ personal websites to enhance knowledge and social interactions. Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratifications theory argues that users of media play an active role in the communication process and are also goal oriented in their media use. The basic premise of the theory is that a media user seeks out a media source that best fulfills the needs of the user (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Since the increase of computer mediated communication in the 21st century, the uses and gratifications theory has become more relevant than ever for understanding new media. However, the basic questions of uses and gratification scholars still remain the same (Ruggiero, 2000). Why do people become involved in one type of computer-mediated communication over the other and what gratifications do they receive from it? Based on the preceding information the following two research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Why do job seekers use the Internet over traditional mediums and what gratifications do they receive from it?

RQ2: Why do hiring managers use the Internet to evaluate job seekers over traditional mediums and what gratifications do they receive from it?

Based on the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications theory—these questions can be considered in a few different ways. First, in the context of this production thesis, this theory needs to address the needs of the hiring manager and the needs of the job seeker as they use the medium of the Internet.

Lin (1996) argued that the main benefit of the uses and gratifications theory is that it allows researchers to investigate “mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communication content, and psychological gratifications within a particular or cross-cultural context” (p. 579).

For example, the use of a Google search by hiring managers to evaluate a potential candidate can be linked to a few different gratifications. Some of these gratifications include parasocial interaction, interpersonal communication, and surveillance. To explain further, the term “parasocial interaction” was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) and is now used by social scientists to describe when one party knows a significant amount of information about the other party, but the other party does not. In the context of this production thesis, hiring managers often involve themselves in parasocial interaction as they utilize background checks, reference checks and web searches to evaluate a potential candidate. Second, if the job seeker is able proceed to the interview process, the hiring manager may include some of the information that was discovered in the evaluation process to facilitate interpersonal communication during the interview. And finally, the hiring manager meets the gratification of surveillance as they monitor the candidate’s social media accounts for any disqualifying comments or information

posted by the candidate. It is important to understand that the perceived gratification factors for the job seeker are quite different for the hiring manager.

Next, the needs and gratifications of the job seeker utilizing the computer-mediated tool of a personal web platform must be considered. Needless to say, the objective of a job seeker is to find a job that fits his or her interest, desire and motivation. The needs and gratifications of the job seeker can be applied to some of the needs argued in Stafford, Stafford and Schkade (2004), who sought to find Internet specific gratifications. Specifically, the uses and gratifications theory was found to have three main categories of gratifications: content gratification, process gratification, and social gratification (Stafford, Stafford & Schkade, 2004). It is evident that the needs of the job seeker can be found in each of these categories, however, based on the objective of the job seeker, it falls primarily into the social category. The social gratification of the job seeker is highlighted in one's need to develop relationships with potential employers. The job seeker's need involves forming and deepening social ties through the hiring managers evaluation process.

Following the theoretical framework of this production thesis through the uses and gratifications theory, the next segment documents the process of creating the website in the production overview. We will measure the success of this project through measurable statistics from Weebly Analytics and Twitter, which quantify content distribution and engagement.

CHAPTER 3

PRODUCTION OVERVIEW

Objective and Purpose

The purpose of this production thesis involves the exploration of the process of creating a website designed to provide public speaking and personal development articles for online readers. The website focuses primarily on public speaking and presentation tips, drawing from my career in marketing and education. The website portrays the theme of “personal development through effective communication.” SpeakTips.com is the web address of the production aspect of this project. The site is now live and can be accessed anywhere in the world.

The primary objective in creating this website was to create a platform to display my passion, knowledge and expertise in public speaking. My second goal was to use this website as a personal branding tool for potential employers.

Web Content Management System Review

At the initial stages of this project, I researched the most user friendly, reliable, and functional web content management system services offered. In fact, the three services most consistently recommended by reviewers were WordPress, Squarespace and Weebly. Each of these services comes with various advantages and disadvantages. In the initial stages of the production, I had chosen Squarespace because it seemed to meet the overall needs of the

production. However, choosing SquareSpace served as one of the biggest challenges in this project as I kept receiving formatting errors and layout errors in the build process. This frustration led me to abandon the service altogether and adopt the more user-friendly service known as Weebly.

Weebly allows users without a significant amount of technical coding knowledge to create a fully functional and tastefully designed website. In contrast to SquareSpace, Weebly uses a drag-and-drop builder, which makes it one of the easiest web building services to use. Additionally, Weebly includes a broad range of free templates, which allows the user to build a more professional looking page. This undoubtedly serves as one of the main advantages of Weebly, in contrast to WordPress, which also includes quite a few free templates, but of less quality with a more amateur look. WordPress offers professional looking templates but charges significantly more than Weebly and are sold separately from the WordPress package.

Domain Hosting

Hosting for the website was done through GoDaddy's hosting services. As the world's largest domain name register, this service offered a competitive price lower than Weebly's in regards to house hosting. Since the domain name was purchased outside of Weebly, connecting it to the Weebly content management system required a few steps. First, the site required changing the domain's DNS records to one of Weebly's IP addresses. This required logging into the "my account" section of GoDaddy in the domain tab and then selecting the DNS Zone File tab. After finding the DNS Zone tab of the SpeakTips website and choosing "edit" the IP address was

typed and saved. After clicking save, the process only took a few hours before everything worked smoothly through Weebly's content management system.

Logo and Web Page Layout

The logo for SpeakTips.com was created using the free SquareSpace logo creation tool. SquareSpace offers the tool for free, but only with a lower resolution with a watermark. A high-resolution logo without the watermark can be purchased for \$10. Through the logo creation tool, users can specify the name of the website, the tagline, colors and specific fonts. After customizing this section of the site, the user can search through the repository for thousands of symbols, that can be used as a logo. Subsequent to choosing the preferred logo, the tool has a simple drag-and-drop style interface that allows users to resize all elements live. After arranging the logo in the specified format, the user can then import the logo in black, white and in color. It is then saved to a unique URL page where the logo will be saved and edited at anytime in the future for users who have an account.

The logo I chose for the website includes the name of the website "SpeakTips" in white letters in an easy-to-read Arial font. Next to the website title I chose a symbol of two conversation bubbles which elegantly complemented the font. This logo can be seen on the upper left of the website homepage.

For the homepage layout, I opted for the landing page option, which includes space for a header image, the title of the image, a subtitle, and an action button. The header image was carefully chosen to communicate the brand of SpeakTips. The image shows an individual giving a presentation in a medium sized room. The subtitle of the homepage states, "Empower Yourself

– Read on for tips, articles, and tutorials to rock your next presentation.” Below the landing page are the blog posts. Currently, the website displays the blog posts just below the landing image and heading on the homepage. The blog settings are presently set to show the five most recently posted blog posts. The theme and the layout were chosen with a minimalistic and simple design philosophy. The goal of the layout and theme involved creating an interface that was simple and intuitive to the end user.

Below the landing page image and title is the standard two-column blog post format. The main column includes the content from the blog posts, while the secondary column on the right includes the RSS subscription button, social media buttons, author bio, blog archives, and categories. The RSS subscription was created through the service Feedburner, owned by Google. Feedburner allows users who are subscribed to receive each update from the blog either via e-mail or through their dedicated RSS reader online.

Towards the bottom of every page on the website there is a unified footer. The footer includes a short biography, the logo, my headshot and the ability to contact me if needed.

Social Media

The social media buttons were also specifically created for the SpeakTips brand. The SpeakTips brand currently channels its message through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Gmail with unified screen names. Dutta (2010) argues that today’s leaders must embrace social media for three reasons. Firstly, Dutta (2010) argues that social media is a low-cost platform that allows individuals to build their personal brands. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are absolutely free to the user—making the cost of their use to only be time. The cost of web hosting is very minimal

and most companies offer fairly low cost options. Dutta (2010) discusses that social media allows individuals to rapidly engage with peers, employees and customers and anyone in the general public as the second reason. The final reason Dutta (2010) argues is that social media gives individuals an opportunity to learn from instant feedback.

Dutta (2010) states, “Active participation in social media can be a powerful tool—the difference between leading effectively and ineffectively, and between advancing and faltering in the pursuit of your goals” (p. 2). Since the benefits of developing a social media presence are many, it is necessary for every job seeker to have a social media strategy. Dutta (2010) argues that it is essential for individuals to regularly Google themselves and compare results with their peers search results.

Content and Articles

The menu on the upper right hand is divided into five tabs: home, services, resume, about and contact. The homepage is the main URL, while services, resume, about and the contact link are separate pages. The homepage includes the most recent blog post articles, while the services section offers executive presentation coaching, speech evaluation, and speech writing services to the site readers. This page was created with a “contact us” form, which allows users of the site to submit their name, email address, and a comment. This will allow me to contact users who are in need of presentation coaching via Skype or through other videoconferencing services.

The next tab on the menu is titled resume. This page includes my career summary, education, and a document reader, which includes a graphical copy of my curriculum vitae. This section was created specifically for hiring managers who may be looking into a more detailed

view of my background. Following the resume tab is the about section, which includes the informal story of how the brand was developed and also includes some of my career history. The site also includes the mission and vision of the SpeakTips brand, further communicated through my own personal career story. The final tab is the contact tab, which is a quick and easy page that allows the reader to instantly contact me via e-mail.

The target audience of the content on SpeakTips includes individuals who have searched for “public speaking tips” on a search engine. SpeakTips intends to be a resource for individuals looking to excel on their next presentation. With that goal in mind, the content on this page was created with information and research from some of the leading experts in the field of public speaking.

The website launched with ten posted articles about different topics in public speaking, among them attention getting devices, audience engagement, storytelling, distracting habits, and filler words are a few of the topics written about. These topics can be seen in the category section on the homepage or also by moving towards previously written articles in the blog section.

Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization is described as a cluster of strategies used to increase the amount of visitors to a website by obtaining a high-ranking placement within a search engine (Deshmukh & Parikh, 2013). After launching the website, SpeakTips has been added to Google and Bing through the SEO tab within the Weebly content management system as well as directly through Google webmaster tools. The way this process works is by including a site description and meta keywords. The meta keywords I used were: public speaking, presentation coaching,

speech writing, speech evaluation, personal development, leadership, blogging, blog, platform building, coaching, delivery, training, training and development. Google requires webmasters to create a login for their accounts. The Google webmaster tools account includes a section that asks users to verify the ownership of the site. Once this is verified, Google offers webmasters analytics, ranking and search data.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The industry standard of measuring the success of a website is often measured through Google analytics which can offer insight on content distribution. Twitter is often used to measure engagement with the core end user. The SpeakTips brand primarily used Weebly analytics for its data. From the period of May 29th 2014 to October 27th 2014, SpeakTips.com has received a total of 8,100 page total views and 6,500 unique page visits. This amount has vastly exceeded expectations. If the site maintains the average of 1,500 page views a month, it could reach a potential amount of 18,000 unique page views a year.

The SpeakTips twitter page currently has 83 followers and also has been added into the “business influencers” and “public speaking bloggers” lists on Twitter. Membership in these subcommittees is important because it drives traffic to the brand and allows the brand to engage with its target audience. Based on the analytics results, content distribution and readership has been growing steadily since the domain was registered in May of 2014. Twitter engagement, however, has been stagnant.

Discussion

Communicating with hiring managers is a vital social necessity that is universal among all cultures. In the 21st century, much of that communication will be increasingly done through

computer-mediated communication. This production thesis intended to explore the process of creating a website designed to for the purpose of building a personal brand and communicating that brand to hiring managers. Throughout the course of building this website, the SpeakTips brand took shape through search engine optimization, social media marketing and through the content created on the website. Potential employers are now able to search and easily find SpeakTips through a simple Google search.

The results reveal that in general, if useful content is regularly created on the website viewership will steadily increase, allowing users to be influenced by the messages. One of the weaknesses of this production thesis was the lack of quantifiable evidence that linked the uses and gratifications of the job seeker as well as the hiring manager. Future studies in branding and job seeking through computer-mediated communication should consider survey research of job seekers and hiring managers to more accurately predict their uses and gratifications for using new mediums on the Internet.

Gunkel (2009) suggests, “Whatever Media Studies 2.0 involves, one thing is certain, there is a need to confront and deal with new technologies, most notably computers and computer networks” (p. 53). Therefore, we must continue to study the effects, benefits, and consequences of new media and computer-mediated communication.

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