# How Should the ABSEL Website Look? Some Suggestions Based on a Comparative Assessment of 16 Professional Organizations.

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Motivated by discussions surrounding improvements to the ABSEL website which occurred during the 2016 ABSEL meeting in New Orleans, the authors set out to develop a rubric for assessing websites of professional bodies and then evaluating the websites of 16 academic organizations. Following this review, the authors identified best practices for building a successful website, evaluated ABSEL's current website, and identified the strengths and weaknesses of ABSEL's website.. Website characteristics Appearance, Layout, Appeal to Target Audience, Optimized for Mobile Experience and Social Media Integration. The paper concludes with specific actionable strategies to address the gaps found between an ideal website and ABSEL's current website.

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades millions of websites have emerged in response to a surge in interest by organizations in including "education, business, entertainment and health" (Rahman & Ahmed, 2013, p.40). "The number of websites on the World Wide Web has exceeded 1 billion since March 2016 (Internet Live Statistics, n.d.) and is expected to continue to grow. With the increasing influence of online media, "company websites have become important communication channels between companies customers" (Kwon & Jeong, 2015, p.71). Organizations, like companies, have websites for a variety of reasons including providing information and/or generating sales (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). A website allows people to learn about a company in a timely manner before going to a store or contacting a firm. Nowadays companies use their websites not only to sell their products and services but also to enhance the image of their organizations and strengthen the relationship with their customers.

The Internet has grown immensely over the last decade from serving a limited elite audience to being an integral part of a majority of the world population. (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). As per the CIA Factbook, there were 1,000 Internet host

computers in 1984 which has increased to about 900 million by 2012. Internet Live Stats estimates that currently, the Internet user base in the world is over 3.5billion strong. These statistics show that it has fundamentally transformed the way businesses operate around the world which has led to certain changes in business processes and strategies. Businesses are more linked to the information-based economy in which speed, flexibility, and customer centricity are paramount. Advanced technology and the accumulation of customer data change the way marketers communicate with customers, the main focus of their attention. Businesses are not only employing the Internet for customer acquisition, but also for customer conversion and customer retention (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). As the Internet continues to grow and evolve, businesses find it crucial to create and maintain customer-effective websites.

Customer acquisition and retention are two of the main goals of marketing. It means that in order to grow and prosper, all businesses need to attract new customers on a regular basis. For many businesses their websites serve as the main channel of providing information and communication. Once consumers visit an organization's website, websites play a critical role in persuading consumers to engage and eventually convert them to be customers. Engagement can take multiple forms including creating an account, subscribing to a mailing list, interacting on social media etc. The eventual goal is to result in a purchase or other form of value exchange (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). Customer retention refers to the process of turning a new customer into a loyal customer who will stay a customer for a very long time. The goal of the website is not only to attract the customer but also to persuade the customer to stay on the website for a long time, navigate it and frequently use it. Growth in customer value is achieved by the acquisition, conversion, and retention process. Websites provide organizations with easy tools to track customer behavior and organizations use these data to enhance value for its customers. (Roberts & Zahay, 2012).

As Internet marketing becomes more mainstream, websites have achieved a level of maturity (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). It takes about seven seconds for website visitors to decide if they want to stay on a particular website or not (ITVibes, n.d.). Websites can grab a potential customer's attention if they have these key elements: appearance, content, functionality and

website usability. A website must be visually appealing, polished and professional as an attractive site is more likely to leave a positive impression and keep visitors online. Along with style, the website should also be informative and provide relevant information for the potential target market. With regard to functionality, every component of the website should work quickly and correctly. In addition, the website should be easy to read, navigate, and understand (Spritzweb Solutions, n.d.)

The proposed study intended to develop a general rubric for evaluating websites. Once developed, this rubric could be used to assess websites to identify best practices in website creation. These best practices could then be effectively used to create or update a website to reach a target audience and increase traffic to the site. During ABSEL's 2016 conference in New Orleans, LA the marketing and website teams of the ABSEL Board expressed interest in understanding key areas to target for improvement in the ABSEL website. Motivated by this interest in learning more about the process, the lead author of this paper, a student at a small private university in the US Northeast, decided to develop a website evaluation matrix and use it to evaluate different websites including ABSEL's under the guidance of the remaining authors.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. There is a review of relevant literature to identify variables that are essential to making a website successful. Based on these findings, a rubric will be developed to evaluate websites. As a demonstration of the application of the rubric, about 17 professional websites, including ABSEL's will be assessed using the rubric. Finally, based on this assessment, key areas of improvement will be identified along with several recommendations to be implemented for the ABSEL website.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Websites play an integral role in providing essential information to their users and allowing them to interact directly with the website. With the increasing number of companies taking advantage of the Internet, it is important to establish what drives utilization of one website over another (Rosen, 2004, p.787). Therefore, a set of criteria would be helpful to evaluate and compare websites. Many researchers have attempted to evaluate websites and have proposed a variety of criteria, methods, and techniques. These include:

- Usability
- Appearance
- Appeal to Target Demographics
- Functionality, Consistency of Design, Presentation of Information
- Unique Value and Originality
- Accessibility
- Accuracy, Currency, and Objectivity
- Search Engine Optimization
- Social Media Integration

Each of these criteria is discussed in some detail below.

Usability is recognized as the most important quality factor of any modern website (Rahman & Ahmed, 2013, p.73). Website usability refers to making a website easy to use and learn for end-users. That is, no special instructions or training is required. This definition has been based on ISO 9241-11, which defines usability as "the effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction with which specified users achieve specified goals

in particular environments" (Rahman & Ahmed, 2013, p.72). Usability studies have utilized multiple methods and quality attributes to evaluate academic websites. It is accepted that having a common set of criteria to provide specific guidelines for designing and evaluating the quality of websites benefits developers.

Appearance of a website is also among the most important criteria according to Moshagen & Thielsch (Moshagen, & Thielsch, 2013, p.1305). Aesthetically pleasant websites tend to grab a user's attention more, create emotions and leave a positive impression on users so that users want to stay on the website to explore further. How the website is laid out and how easily it lets a visitor navigate also contribute toward the appearance criterion (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). Consistent layout and ease of navigation allow users to quickly adapt to the design of the website and confidently predict the location of information and navigation controls across pages.

Appeal to target demographics was chosen as another criterion to evaluate a website in light of a gender gap that exists between how males and females process information. Apparently, each group approaches the Internet differently. A study conducted in Taiwan showed significant gender differences in the importance of interface design criteria (Lin & Hsieh, 2016, p. 2078). The three most important website interface design criteria for males were compatibility, minimal action, and flexibility, whereas the three most important for females were compatibility, learnability, and user guidance. According to Lin & Hsieh (2016), thoughtful and well-planned information architecture and user interface will consider the different needs of each gender to reduce inefficiency, to facilitate the experience of the user

The purpose of the website is also an important criterion as it reflects the objectives of the organization and takes into account the needs and preferences of the target market. The website should communicate its purpose so that users have a clear understanding of what kind of information they might find on the website. Objectives of the website might also depend on whether the website is informational (websites that provide only information) or transactional (websites that help users in facilitating transactions) in nature.

Functionality, Consistency of Design and Presentation of Information are part of the criteria developed by Forrester Research (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). These qualities help users interact with the website more effectively and efficiently. The consistency of design helps create trust and guides visitors to take action. Forrester Research suggests that websites need to contain graphics, icons, and symbols that are simple and easy to understand and that graphical images contribute positively to the user experience.

Unique Value & Originality are also recommended by Forrester Research (Roberts & Zahay, 2012). A website should clearly state the unique value proposition an organization offers to users and how this site differs from its key competitors. Therefore, the content of the website should be selected with a clear understanding of what the target market wants and expects to find. Satisfying this criterion will help organizations gain a competitive advantage and provide users with information they cannot find elsewhere.

Accessibility is one of the five factors offered by Rahman & Ahmed as having an impact on website access by individuals with different abilities (Rahman & Ahmed, 2013, p.40). They argue it is important that a website load quickly (5 seconds or less) and be viewable in different browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox and Google Chrome), operating systems and monitor resolutions. Users today are accessing the Internet via multiple

devices and expect to connect at any time. Satisfying this criterion will aid in increasing the number of potential users of the website. Important in this discussion is the ability for users with disabilities to have equal access to the Internet and, specifically, to any website. Since the Internet is rapidly gaining in importance in people's lives, it is crucial that it be accessible by all people regardless of one's physical capabilities.

Accuracy, currency, and objectivity were other factors established by Rahman & Ahmed (2013, p.40). Accuracy refers to the degree to which a website is free from errors. That is, can the information be verified offline and is the information on the website reliable (Metzger, 2007)? Currency refers to whether the information is up-to-date. Objectivity involves identifying the purpose of the site and whether the information provided is fact or opinion (Metzger, 2007). With the plethora of information available on the Internet, this criterion becomes important as it enables users of a website to have access to accurate, reliable and recent information.

According to Suzanne Chaix, the Managing Director of WSI Connect, Search Engine Optimization criteria is a tool that is used for gaining a user's attention, establishing a relationship, and earning credibility (Chaix, 2015). Search Engine Optimization helps users find websites based on key words that they type into a browser. Connecting with a target audience quickly is likely to increase the conversion rate of visitors to users of a particular website. Search Engine Optimization can also establish some degree of credibility which might lead to establishing a long-term relationship with the visitor to the website. The reputation of the website will be enhanced if more links to a website are also found on other credible websites (Chaix, 2015).

In Social Media Examiner's 2013 End of Year Report, 86% of marketers stated that social media is important for their business. That is why Social Media Integration criterion was selected for website evaluation. (Bendror, 2014) According to data from 2015, Facebook is still number 1 on the list of the most popular social networking sites with an estimated 900 million visitors a month. Twitter ranks second with 310 million visitors, and LinkedIn is third with 255 million visitors (Anwar, 2015). Social sharing enables users to share the content of a website with their friends and colleagues using various social networks. As more and more content is shared across social networks, referral traffic grows. This, in turn, increases a website's ranking in search engine results (Mezan, 2012).

# **METHODOLOGY**

Based on the above literature, a comprehensive set of attributes considered to be important for a website was developed. Initially, a set of 25 attributes covering different categories was developed. Faced with overlapping descriptions of the attributes, we reduced the set from 25 to 10. Appendix A lists all the attributes along with a brief description of each one.

Once the list of attributes was identified for use on the assessment rubric, 16 professional and academic associations, were identified. Appendix B lists all the associations whose websites were assessed. The choice of the associations was based on the following – (a) Is the association and its membership identified as primarily academic? (b) Is the association related to an area of interest to ABSEL members? (Is it related to a business discipline? Is it involved with experiential learning? Is it a gaming or related group?) and (c) Does the association appeal to a global audience or is it geographically limited in its reach?

Once the list of comparable associations was finalized, each website was evaluated using a rubric which included the 10 identified attributes. Scoring was based on a 10-point rating scale with number 1 at the low end (lacking most of the attributes of the criteria) and number 10 at the high end (having all attributes of the criteria). Appendix C provides the rubric used to rate each website across the various attributes. During the assessment and rating of each website our goal was to identify best practices of those professional organizations based on the literature and comparative assessment that could be used as a benchmark to create a list of recommendations for ABSEL to make its website more attractive, user-friendly, and valuable to users.

#### **FINDINGS**

The ratings, by category, of the 16 professional websites and that of ABSEL are provided in Appendix D. From this table it was clear that some organizations stood out on different dimensions. The websites of the Society for Human Resource Management and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers ranked the highest on appearance while the Association of International Accountants and American Institute of CPA's ranked the highest on functionality and consistency of design criteria. The ratings for ABSEL highlight five areas where ABSEL was weak. These categories are (a) appearance, (b) layout and ease of navigation, (c) purpose and appeal to target demographic, (d) search engine, mobile optimization and (e) social media integration.

With regard to the appearance of the website category, the ABSEL website does not create emotion and it does not encourage users to remain on the website to explore it at length. The colors of the website are not appealing and the appearance of ABSEL in the top left corner of the home page is not consistent with the actual logo of the organization. This creates both a branding as well as messaging problem. The plain lettering on the website does not stand out and grab a user's attention. It also has a lot of white space that is not utilized efficiently and there is low information density on each page. It lacks action buttons such as Register, Sign In, etc. and the text size and the size of headings should be consistent on each page. The layout and ease of navigation could be improved plus the website should contain copyright, last update, and contact information in the footer. If a user has searched and found a paper of interest there are no printing options. Category and subcategory names should be mutually exclusive on the home page and a search button and breadcrumbs should be provided on each page. A search button is an important tool for easy and fast search using keywords. Breadcrumbs show the path that the visitor has followed to reach a particular location on the website. This also helps users to go backwards if they need to. The home page has 8 menu items when there should be between 4 and 6 and, finally, a site map is not provided in the footer area.

The purpose of the ABSEL website and its appeal to its target demographic category could be strengthened in the following areas: a clear statement of the organization's mission statement on the website; a website design that appeals to both genders; a website that is optimized to mobile devices and an attention to enhance search optimization. Finally, social media like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Talk could be well integrated into the website to initiate and extend the engagement.

#### RECCOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Below are suggestions regarding improvements that could be made to the ABSEL website. These are based on the findings found in Appendix D and the best practices drawn from the reviews of the websites in this study.

# 1. Appearance

- Utilize white space more effectively
- Consider increasing information density on each page
- Consider replacing current ABSEL logo with



- Passive colors need to be consistent with logo (blue & black)
- Add action buttons like Register, Sign on, etc. and make them different colors that are bright and stand out
- Make the headings larger than the text
- Text size should be consistent on each page

### 2. Layout and Ease of Navigation

- Consider dividing the webpage into 16 quadrants with the upper left being the highest priority for content placement, the middle being second priority and the right and bottom being lowest priority
- Add page footers that contain copyright, last update and ABSEL's contact information
- Include printing options for articles and papers
- Make menu buttons more legible
- Menu categories should be clear and mutually exclusive. Combine About ABSEL and About ABSEL 2016 into one category or rename one of these to reduce confusion.
- Home page should have between 4 and 6 menu items with clear labeling (See Below)
- Include between 3 and 4 submenu buttons
- Provide a search button on each page
- Consider making the website multilingual
- Provide breadcrumbs
- Provide a site map in the footer area

#### 3. Purpose and Appeal to Target Demographic

- Consider stating a mission statement under About ABSEL tab or include in on the home page
- Design the website to be compatible with user expectations to attract both genders
  - i. Provide a search button
  - ii. Navigation bar should be logical where the most important items are anchored at the ends with less important ones in the middle. Menus should have clear and exclusive sub categories that will aid in easy and consistent access to specific areas of the website.
  - iii. Provide links to social networks

#### 4. Search Engine & Mobile Optimization

- Make the website mobile optimized so that the text is converted into a format that can be easily read and links easily clickable
- Ensure that the website is in the top 30 references presented from a major search engine for relevant phrases or keywords that are commonly used in respect to ABSEL's core functions (E.g. Gaming, business simulations, experiential learning). This could be achieved by link building using editorial links (content that is seen as worthwhile by other relevant sites to create a link to the organization's site); manual links (being a part of various directories and social bookmarking sites) or manufactured links (blog comments, free article directories etc.). Another way to enhance page ranking would be to purchase keywords for the purpose of SEO but we believe this to be only a short run measure. It is therefore recommended that the organization focus more on creating backlinks through editorials and free article directories. Given the extensive knowledge base ABSEL has relating to creating, and using games for teaching business disciplines as well as experiential learning, the knowledge base could be leveraged to create content that could help create better page ranking for ABSEL website.

# 5. Social Media Integration

- Provide links to social media (should be located at the upper right hand side of each page)
- Incorporate Share buttons (should be provided at the end of the article/page)

The ability of organizations to attract and retain a committed group of clients has been made more difficult in the past decade by the increased use of the Internet. Not-for-profit professional groups such as ABSEL must remain relevant and connected to its target audience by maintaining an up-to-date, informative, and easy to use website. The review and suggestions presented here are intended to offer some guidance to the ABSEL leadership team about how this might be accomplished.

Home	About ABSEL	Conferences & Events	Publications & Papers	Gaming Packages by ABSELites	ABSEL Affiliates
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# APPENDIX A WEBSITE ATTRIBUTES USED IN THIS STUDY

Website Attribute	Description of the Attribute
Appearance	Appearance of the website is designed with a specific target market in mind and the look of the website is also based on the objectives and purpose of the website. The website grabs attention and creates emotions. Emotions are associated with certain colors. Colors on the website align with the message that the website is trying to convey. For example, blue makes users think about something secure, safe and full of experience. Green is associated with the money, health and hope. Purple is associated with wealth, nobility and luxury. Colors are selected based on color phycology and knowing what works best for the target audience. Color is not used alone to convey a message. The website contains passive colors and active colors. Passive colors are main colors (two or three) that make up a visual appeal and align with the logo of the website. Active colors create an isolation effect and call people for action. For example, learn more, shop now, search, more info buttons should stand out and be more vibrant than passive colors. Active color (usually one) should be only used for clickable buttons so that users associate it with actions. Headings on the website should not be the same color as active color not to confuse users as headings are not clickable. Headings on the website are at least 1.6 times as large as the text that they support. There is a high contrast between the text and background color (the difference should be greater than 67). The website makes a positive impression on visitors.
Layout and Ease of Navigation	Web page is divided into 16 quadrants with the upper left being the highest priority for content placement, the middle being second priority and the right and bottom being lowest priority. Page title includes the company or organization name/logo. Page footer area includes copyright, last update and contact e-mail address. Information on the pages can be easily printed and printing options are provided. The website is easy to read, navigate and understand. Important information is broken into categories and easily accessible. Navigation elements are located on the top of the screen making it easier for the viewers to see it. Menu buttons use high-contrast colors and very legible text. Category and subcategory names are clear and mutually exclusive. The most important items are placed first and last in the navigation bar and the least important items are in the middle. Menu categories contain subcategories. Important information is not more than three clicks away. The website has a simple structure. It has a home or parent page, second or child page and third or grandchild page. A home page clearly indicates what the website is about and provides all the essential information that users might want to know. Home page is set in columns (usually 3) and content is divided into small paragraphs. Home page has between 4 and 6 menu items and between 3 and 4 submenu buttons with clear labelling (2 short names). The homepage has such necessary characteristics as important links, access to a site map and a search button (provided on each page). The home page encourages communication with potential customers through social media links, contact information in the footer or contact us page. Home page also has clear calls for action like sign up, download now, etc. Second level pages provide more detailed information. A link to home page is provided on every page making it easy for users to start over if needed. Breadcrumbs are also present showing the path that the visitor has followed to reach a particular location on the w
Purpose and Appeal to Target Demographic	The purpose of the website reflects the objectives of the website and takes into account the needs and preferences of the target market. Objectives of the website depend on whether the website is informational or transactional in nature. The website communicates what it does based on its purpose. The mission statement of the company or organization is explicitly stated using brief and concise text indicating what the company or organization does, how they do it, whom they are doing it for and what value they are bringing. Male-oriented website is based on flexibility, compatibility and minimal action. Flexibility means that interface of the website allows the same tasks to be performed in different ways and allows users to customize the layout function according to their preferences. For example, the design for data entry is flexible and the display is controlled by the user. Compatibility refers to making a website look and function in ways compatible with user expectations. Minimal action enables users to complete certain tasks by performing a minimal amount of actions. For example, the interface of the website provides function keys for frequent control entries or the return to the home page requires only one mouse click. Female-oriented website emphasizes compatibility, learnability and user guidance. Learnability refers to how easily and quickly a first time user can learn how to use the interface of the website. Learnability requires that the interface of the website has clear words and the menu is organized in a logical manner. User guidance refers to whether a user will be provided with enough user support when needed. For example, the interface of the website provides explicit entry for corrections and/or HELP buttons is provided.

Functionality,	The hyperlinks, images and other media on the website are present and working. Headings provide a cue to
Consistency of Design & Presentation of Information	orient users and inform them about what they can expect to find on the page. The website functionality provides clear feedback in response to user actions. Error messages contain clear instructions on what to do next. The content of the website is updated frequently. The website displays correct grammar, spelling and punctuation. All the pages of the website share a similar look and are designed to work together, having the same structure and organization. For example, the labels used on buttons, links and the visual characteristics of those buttons (font color, main color, etc.) should be consistent across all the pages. Central elements are repeated throughout the website to help visitors quickly adapt to the design of the website and predict the location of information. Consistent design enables the users to know what website they are visiting no matter what page of that website they are looking at. The website uses the language that is clear and easy to understand. Contemporary 12 (14 for older adults) sans serif font (Arial or Verdana) is used and gives a webpage a clean look. Important words or phrases might be displayed in all uppercase, bold, or italics (no more than one or two words or phrases per paragraph). The audience should be familiar with the words and phrases that are used on the website. The website is free from jargon and buzzwords. Acronyms and abbreviations are defined before they are first used. The website uses graphics, icons and symbols that are simple and also easy to understand. The primary language for the website is chosen. Graphical images are necessary and contribute positively to the user experience. They engage the website viewers and help maintain viewer interest and attention. There are 3 or 4 images per page. They do not distract the viewer from the main content of the website rather than reinforce the key points. Graphics are compressed and download quickly. Thumbnails are provided to preview larger images. Any animation is user controlled and has an introductory explanation
Unique Value & Originality	The website indicates what unique value proposition it offers to the users and how the site differs from its key competitors. Content of the website is selected with a deep understanding of what the target market wants and expects to find. Content of the website is also relevant to the topic or business industry and appropriate to the audience. The website is distinguishable from the other websites and provides the information that cannot be found elsewhere.
Accessibility	The website is highly accessible, it loads quickly (5 seconds or less) and can be viewable in different browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox and Google Chrome), operating systems and monitor resolutions. All users have equal access to the website. Text and images are large or enlargeable making it easier for users with poor sight to read and understand the information on the website. Links are underlined as well as colored to ensure that color blind users can see them. Clickable link are large enough to help users with motor difficulties. Videos are close captioned to enable deaf users understand the video. All information conveyed with color is also available without color for users that have difficulty discriminating colors. Text equivalent is provided for every non-text element that conveys important information for users with visual impairments.
Accuracy & Currency	The website presents information that is based on a verifiable fact rather than on opinion. Website lists sources for presented information and/or provides links to reputable outside sources. The website includes date the page was written, placed on the Web and last revised. If the website presents time-sensitive information, it includes the most recent information on the topic. There are also no dead or broken links on the website.
Search Engine & Mobile Optimization	Website is in the top 30 references presented from a major search engine. Search hints are provided and different search options are available. The website is mobile optimized and does not require zooming or scrolling down. The text is converted into a format that can be easily read and links are easily clickable. Mobile optimized website is easily accessible and allows their users to engage with mobile-specific features such as click-to-call, directions to the office or a map of the company locations, etc.
Social Media Integration	Links to social media like Twitter, Facebook, Tumbler, Talk to me are provided and working. The determination of which social links to use on the website should be based on why the organization wants to use social media and who they are aiming to reach. Social profile icons are usually located in the upper right hand side of the page as that is where the users expect to find them based on their prior user experience. Share buttons might also be incorporated to allow users to distribute the content of the website across a variety of social networks. Sharing buttons should not distract users from the content on the page. They should be provided at the end of the article/page rather than being placed between the article/middle of the page.
Objectivity	The website provides information with a minimum of bias and states more than one point of view. Bias means that a person states an idea, shows only facts and information that support his or her position and does not give equal chance to a different idea. Bias in an article would show one point of view, using selected facts and quotes to support that particular point of view. Facts or opinions that do not support the point of view in a biased article are excluded. The information on the website could be biased if the website is sponsored by a company or organization that advocates a certain philosophy. Biased points of view may come in the following forms: exaggerations, overgeneralizations (all or none statements), stereotypical comments, opinion stated as facts, imbalances or one sided views. The information on the website should be fair, balanced and reasonable.