

Web Usability and Rare Breed Engagement: The Livestock Conservancy

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Introduction and Purpose

The conservation of rare breeds of livestock represents an area that spans unique species, potential uses, organizations, and individuals (Alderson, 2018; Kendall, 2003). As involvement with this issue increases, one organization has become the forefront of information and activity. The Livestock Conservancy (LC), established in 1977, has become the lead authority on rare breeds within the United States, working with government entities like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the National Animal Germplasm Program (Blackburn, 2006; Kendall, 2003). Their work with these organizations, as well as their development and continual update of the Conservation Priority List (CPL), make them one, if not the first, line of information for interested individuals. To continue the conservation of such breeds, it is imperative the LC is successfully communicating to individuals. The purpose of this study was to examine the usability of the Livestock Conservancy's website. The objectives of the study were to 1) examine the usability of the website; 2) identify the media richness of the website; and 3) identify areas of needed improvement for future web engagement in the area of rare breeds.

Conceptual Framework

According to the media richness theory, media has the ability to transmit needed information, a task that the LC strives to fill. There are four areas that the richness of media is judged on: capacity to include personal information, immediacy of feedback, conveyance of multiple cues, and variety of language carried (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The richer the media is, the greater the engagement and use of the media will be. Understanding the components of richness that improve engagement and ensuring their use can serve the LC well as their website is an important part of their promotion of rare breeds. For this website, the conveyance of multiple cues and the variety of language carried will be the greatest indicators of media richness.

Methods

The website of the LC was thoroughly examined to understand how an individual looking for information might approach the content. The front page was used as the focus for design and website entry point, with specific interest given to the conservation priority list and specific breed pages, as these locations would serve as the primary areas for general and more specific rare breed knowledge acquisition. While over 500 pages of content were identified, researchers followed web design nomenclature and only clicked within 3 pages to analyze media richness. Krug (2006) and others have noted most users will only click in 3 times before moving to another site. One researcher over 3 days analyzed the pages by taking field notes as they worked through the site looking for information on specific rare breeds. To ensure reliability triangulation between the researcher, the literature and a peer check were done. Since this is a qualitative study, it is important to reveal that the researcher is related to the topic as they are a graduate student researching rare breed engagement with prior knowledge and use of the LC website. In determining good design and usability, Krug was used, primarily focusing on the facts that people do not want to have to think to find what they are looking for and that people scan web pages (2006).

Findings

The website was examined by first looking at the front page, with the intent of examining the design and usability of the site. The site offers straight forward navigation, with sections and subsections. The front page has mostly links to other pages, allowing users to easily find what they are searching for, as well as not overwhelming the page. The usability continues within the CPL page with the breed divisions visible by spacing and coloration. Overall, the website is designed to be very usable.

When looking at these breed pages specifically in terms of media richness, first conveyance of multiple cues was examined. Taking a closer look at the paragraphs containing the history and description of the breed reveal more of a narrative style as opposed to strictly giving facts. This narrative style allows the reader to get to know the breed without having ever interacted with the animal. The variety of language covered proves to be quite rich for these breed pages. They contain straight paragraphs of text, but also a small sidebar of fact and the use of numbers versus words for dates and weights. The pages have a color image of the breed and a select few breeds have links to videos of the animals hosted on the organizations YouTube page. These aspects demonstrate a richness of media, at least within the breed specific pages.

Looking at the front page, an area to address is the perceived lack of a search bar. While there is one, it is small and hidden among other links. In the CPL page, clicking on the name of the species takes the user back to the beginning of the CPL page, instead of to an area about that species as expected. The breed pages themselves lack some consistency in terms of additional content, specifically with which pages have it and how it is placed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the LC website serves as a tremendous resource of vast knowledge for the area of rare breeds and raising livestock in general. However, with over 500 pages of information, it can be difficult to find the information that users are looking for. The LC does a good job at dividing up information into easily understandable categories, and specifically provides direct access to the resources and pages that their specific audiences may be looking for.

Looking directly at the breed pages, they have both a conveyance of multiple cues and a variety of language covered that gives them the richness of media that helps the website transmit important information about these breeds, draws users in, and pique their interest. However, they fail to further grow this initial curiosity on their breed pages. One way to direct users toward more information about the breed would be to link the breed and species associations. In addition, they could provide a direct link from the breed page to the listing of said breed in their “Breeders & Products Directory” allowed those interested in the breed or the products to find it.

Examining the usability and richness of an organization like the LC can help to determine what and how engagement with rare breeds occurs online. This information can help inform future research, like how youth within 4-H interact with rare breeds through 4-H curriculum and shows, as well as how other organizations approach promotion and education of these breeds.

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