My.UCDavis and Quick Poll

The original objective of this Honors Challenge team was to find ways to increase the response rate of QuickPoll. After preliminary research, it became apparent that response rate was tied to usage of the My.UCDavis.edu portal by the student body, and that this usage was infrequent. In response to this finding, this team refocused its research to encompass both My.UCDavis.edu and QuickPoll. The new objective was to determine underlying factors that could increase usage of the My.Ucdavis.edu portal and the Quick Poll feature found on the portal.

1 About The Davis Honors Challenge Program:

The Davis Honors Challenge (DHC) is a program for highly motivated students interested in enhancing their education through special courses, closer contact with faculty, and dynamic interaction with academic peers. Interested students apply in the spring quarter for places in the following year. The charge was a part of this program. For more information about DHC, see their webpage: http://registrar.ucdavis.edu/UCDWebCatalog99_00/WebCatCrs/gc_hnr.htm

2 Charge To The Davis Honors Challenge Team:

Develop a marketing plan to increase the overall response rate and to improve the response rate from subgroups that may be currently underrepresented in the QuickPolls. Explore ways of increasing the use of the QuickPoll as accessed directly from the My.UcDavis portal. Find other online opportunities which may be used to provide students with access to the QuickPoll in the future. Determine what, if anything, can be learned from the experiences of other institutions that use similar polling methods.
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My.ucdavis.edu is a web portal offered by UcDavis that integrates various UC Davis web applications and online services into one webpage. The purpose of the portal is to provide a time saving service to the students and faculty of UC Davis by collection worthwhile links to news and service websites. Examples of links on My.ucdavis.edu include www.weather.com and geckomail.ucdavis.edu.

QuickPoll is an online poll conducted by SARI (Student Affairs Research and Information). SARI has implemented an online poll on the My.ucdavis.edu portal in the hopes to gather feedback from the students and faculty that visit the portal. The subjects for the polls conducted on QuickPoll are brought to SARI by various departments and organizations around campus.

Following preliminary research which include random polling of students on campus, it was decided that the most efficient method for uncovering the reasons for the low usage of My.ucdavis.edu and QuickPoll would to conduct several focus groups of students on campus. In total, thirty people participated in a focus group lead by our team members. The groups were held during the month of May 2002, on consecutive nights during the week. Participants were offered pizza and refreshments for attending.

Results from the Focus Groups Relating to My.ucdavis.edu

During the focus groups, several problems were brought up repeatedly during the discussions. The problems dealt with issues such as the portal technology, the ease of use, and the usefulness of the portal.

Specifically, participants cited unreliability when using different systems (i.e. Macs) in combination with certain browsers (i.e. Netscape). Focus group members also raised the issue of slow load times due to computer intensive content (i.e. pictures, and java). The slow load times were also exacerbated by off campus users relegated to slower phone modems.

Portal users in the focus group also complained of excessive clutter on the portal. Students said that majority of the links on the webpage were never used and only served to hide the more useful areas of the portal. In response to these comments, this team asked if anyone present knew about the customizability of the portal. Nearly all of the students said that they were unwilling or too busy to learn how to customize the portal. In addition, many students felt that the repeated login screens needed to use some features were frustrating and too troublesome.

While the interface seemed to present definite obstacles to the users of the portal in our focus groups, the prevalent reason for not frequently utilizing My.ucdavis.edu was the limited usefulness. Most students that knew of the portal said that they only used the portal to check pass times and final exam times. As a result, they usually would only visit the portal 3 or 4 times a quarter. The students cited the lack of hosted class websites on My.ucdavis.edu as a major deterrent to frequent use. In addition, many of the services featured on the portal (i.e. geckomail, sisweb) are extremely easy for students to access. As a result, the students felt little need for the portal.

As a direct response to the problems discussed with the focus groups, our team has developed a list of suggestions for the portal. First, the long load times should be minimized through reduction of graphics and extraneous java code on the webpage. Second, the portal should provide links to download compatible browsers. Next, the portal content and organization should be reevaluated. A possible plan could be to offer an empty to near empty portal and allow students to add things as they see fit. In this fashion, unnecessary clutter is avoided. Also, the portal should save all passwords in order to remove the necessity of multiple logins in order to streamline the portal experience. Lastly, if professors started putting their class websites on My.ucdavis.edu or had a link on My.ucdavis.edu to their class site, students would have a definite incentive to repeatedly visit the portal.
As with the portal, several problems were repeatedly mentioned during the focus groups. The most prominent problem with QuickPoll was that a vast minority of the focus groups did not know what QuickPoll was. This points to a huge lack of awareness of QuickPoll amongst the student population. QuickPoll’s obscurity stems from poor publicity and appearance. Very few students recalled having ever seen QuickPoll while using My.UCDavis.edu. The QuickPoll seems to blend in with the other items found on the portal. It also has an inconsistent presence on the portal. The QuickPoll periodically appears and disappears from the portal depending on whether or not a poll is being taken. Also, some members of the focus groups voiced doubts as to whether or not the polls being run on QuickPoll had any actual impact and significance. In contrast, other students felt little or no interest in the issues being polled.

Once again, the suggestions our team has developed follows directly from the problems raised by our focus groups. First, the publicity of QuickPoll should be increased through advertisement campaigns. The QuickPoll should also be made to stand out against the normal features of the webpage. Second, the duration of the poll should be displayed in order to empower the students with more information and hopefully increase interest. Third, consistent duration of polls would also help to cement the idea of QuickPoll in the minds of students. Lastly, even if there is not a current poll running, a placeholder should be present on the webpage in order to keep QuickPoll prominent in the My.UCDavis.edu experience of students.

Other suggestions for QuickPoll included the inclusion of the sponsors for the issues raised by QuickPoll; a running total for poll results after users have completed the poll; a synopsis of the background behind the question displayed directly beneath the poll; a system for prizes and incentives to encourage more responses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, My.UCDavis.edu is hampered by the visual over saturation of information and of limited usefulness. The user is lost and easily discouraged from learning how to customize the portal to their needs. QuickPoll suffers from low turnout not only because of infrequent My.UCDavis.edu traffic, but also from poor visibility and awareness to the campus body.

However, it is the opinion of this group that both My.UCDavis.edu and QuickPoll are viable endeavors especially if the suggestions are implemented. They both need some tweaking and time to mature.