

5 Addressing a Need: What Communities are Good Candidates for a Website with a Google™ Mashup?

introduction:

a community that can be helped

Communities that are most helped by a Google Map™ mashup generally exhibit a few key commonalities. In this chapter, I will discuss four common themes found in communities that tend to benefit from a well-made mashup website.

DISCONNECTION BETWEEN RESIDENTS AND RESOURCES One central characteristic of communities that can be helped by a well-made Google Map™ mashup is *disconnection*. A community in which many residents are unaware of local resources or information will likely benefit from a mashup that portrays these things. For example, a map that displays local attractions for parents and children, along with contact information, hours of operation, and a brief description, facilitates the planning process for a family weekend by putting all relevant information in one place. Viewers of this kind of map are not only able to conceptualize the locations of many resources around them, of which they may have been previously unaware, but they have access to other information they might want before selecting which resource to utilize. A good mashup, as indicated by its name, “mashes” together information relevant to its users, obtained from multiple sources, thus saving the research for the mapper, not the users.

DISCONNECTION AMONG RESOURCE PROVIDERS Secondly, a community will benefit from a mashup if there appears to be a disconnection among the organizations providing the resources. If a community is home to many organizations with similar or related missions, each of which is largely unaware of the many similar organizations around them, they too will benefit from a mashup that displays the locations and basic information about each organization. In creating such a map, not only are individuals more likely to find and utilize such resources, but also employees of these organizations are more likely to combine efforts with similar institutions and are more able to refer clients to these other resources.

A REASON FOR MAPPING Thirdly, there needs to be a logical reason to turn the information into a map. If, for example, a person wished to make a mashup of the stores in a local mall, little would be shown or accomplished by mapping the locations. A good map mashup publicizes locations throughout a community, providing useful information on each one. Alternatively, a good mashup displays the locations of problems (such as locations of reported thefts or abandoned vehicles) for the sake of publicizing and conceptualizing a local issue in the hopes of promoting change. Good mashups all have something to show – whether it be a plethora of local farm stands or a pattern in the locations from which cars are broken into. A Google Map™ mashup of all the stores in a shopping mall would not be a helpful tool because all the points on the map would be very closely clumped together and it would not serve any purpose to direct individuals to the locations of the stores. However, if a map of an area's local soup kitchens were to reveal that they are all within two blocks of each other, even though the locations on the map would also be clumped together, this map would be showing something to its viewers – namely, that the community's soup kitchens are not well geographically distributed.

It is important to keep in mind that a map is not the solution to every data display need, even some that are geography-related. There are some ways in which map mashups hide patterns in the data, including certain frequencies. The map mashup will allow viewers to see areas in which there are several of whatever is being mapped, but they can also hide other frequencies. For example, in the case of the Hartford Areas Rally Together (HART) Problem Properties map discussed in Chapter 2, if HART members wanted to see who the most problematic absentee property owners were, the map mashup would not facilitate this search. Alternatively, tabular representation that included a column for “owner name” would reveal whether or not there were several properties owned by the same person.

REASONABLE ACCESSIBILITY Lastly, the community that the map is meant to benefit needs to have adequate access to the map; specifically, members of the community must be able to access and use the Internet. As you may have noted, many of the community-based map mashups discussed thus far were created to benefit individuals who are often from low-income households, and thus may not have easy access to the Internet at home. It is important to consider the likelihood that a map's target audience will be able to access it without too much trouble. For many communities, the target audience's Internet access may come largely from local libraries and Internet cafés. If Internet access in a community is particularly rare, it may not be worth creating an online map for use by residents. However, because many communities have access to the

Internet at a local library or other locations, and because digital resources are often able to convey significantly more information than a reasonable printout could, a map mashup is a good option if people can access it from local libraries and other locations. Instead of expending energy and resources looking for a way to fit, print, and distribute all of the information from a mashup onto a printed document – a futile effort as the interactivity of map mashups is not transferrable to paper – this energy is better spent encouraging community members to use the online resource. A good online resource will be sought by those who need it, even if it requires a trip to a library or relative's house. Also important for the mashup makers to consider is the computer literacy of those meant to benefit from the map. Chapters 6, 7, and 10 will cover the important considerations in making a website easy to use, accessible, and well publicized.

How did the SmartChoices website compare to these criteria? The next section will go through each one individually.

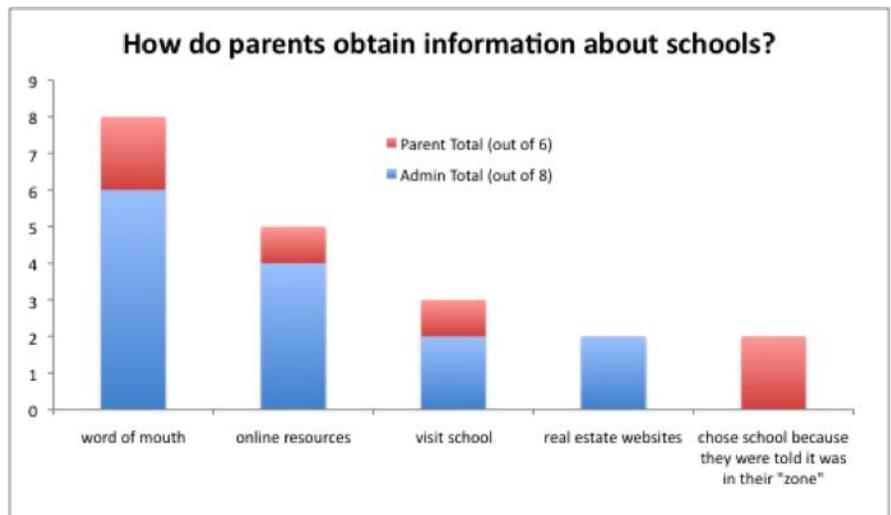
case study:

SmartChoices

Before designing an elaborate resource for parents, we acknowledged that the Hartford community for which we were designing the site met each of the qualifications described in this chapter. This section looks at each of these and how SmartChoices compared.

DISCONNECTION BETWEEN RESIDENTS AND RESOURCES It was the dissonance between the existence of relevant information for parents to make educated school-choice decisions, and the extent to which parents were able to access that information that originally caught the attention of Dougherty and members of ConnCAN. As introduced in Chapter 4, browsing the Internet for information on the performances or quality of individual Hartford schools, especially in a way that allowed comparisons among schools, produced few results. Although all of the sources that we used to obtain racial balance and test score data for every Hartford school were available to the public, as explained in Chapter Four, most parents were either unaware of how to find this information or were not sure how to interpret it.

In December of 2008, one month before the release of SmartChoices, members of the *Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project* held focus group interviews with Hartford parents and school administrators, which revealed much confusion on the part of parents, and even some administrators, regarding which schools their children were eligible to attend. Furthermore, parents reported that they were largely unsure of how to obtain “official” data on a school's performance and often relied largely on word of mouth to obtain information on the quality of a school (Parent and Administrator Interviews, 2008). The table to the right shows the responses of parents and administrators when asked to explain how parents usually retrieve information on local schools. Given that most parents and administrators reported that parents obtained school information through “word of mouth,” the dissonance between existing information and parents' access to it became very clear to us.



Focus Group Data

When the group of Hartford parents and school administrators were asked how parents typically get information on schools, the majority reported that information was shared through word of mouth.

DISCONNECTION AMONG RESOURCE PROVIDERS Also present within the Hartford Community was a similar disconnection among the organizations providing the services; in this case, these organizations were the schools and their administrators, and local nonprofit organizations with focuses in public education. The December focus group interviews revealed that several administrators were often just as uninformed as parents regarding the school system and application process. In discussing the beta version of the SmartChoices website at the focus group, one administrator requested:

“I would love [to see explanations of] ‘All Choice: What is all Choice?’ ‘Project Choice: What is Project Choice?’ ‘Open Choice: What is Open Choice?’ [laughs]. Because I can’t believe I’m confusing that! And I know that parents are confused about that as well, because, like I said, obviously I’m not able to answer all the questions...and parents have come up to me and said, ‘If I want to be a part of Project Choice, what options does that give me? If I want to be a part of Open Choice, what options does that give me?’ I mean, I’ve had that exact question.”

(Parent and Administrator Interviews, 2008)

A REASON FOR MAPPING The information we planned to include on the SmartChoices site made sense to be displayed as a map. In addition to Bell’s explanation of the influence of geography on parents’ school choice decisions (as described in Chapter 4), both parents and administrators in our focus group interviews named “distance from home” as the most frequent answer to the question “What are important factors to parents choosing a school?” (Parent and Administrator Interviews, 2008). By mapping the actual locations of the schools, parents would better be able to conceptualize the whereabouts of each school, which was valuable information to them. Additionally, the way the database was constructed allowed the website to calculate the exact distance between the searched address and each school.

REASONABLE ACCESSIBILITY Internet access was a concern in creating SmartChoices. In 2006, Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez announced that two-thirds of Hartford residents were still without a home Internet connection (Millman, 2008). Despite this, we decided that the information that we could share with parents using an interactive map mashup far outweighed anything that we could afford to print as an informative handout. Furthermore, we believed that we would be able to publicize the site well enough that Hartford parents who may not have access to the Internet at home would be inclined to utilize a public Internet connection in order to access SmartChoices. Chapter 10 will discuss the best ways to publicize a map mashup to a community.

Upon considering each of these “qualifications” of a community that could be helped by a map mashup, we found that Hartford did indeed meet each one. However, we knew that some characteristics of our target audience would require additional consideration as we designed the site. The next chapter will discuss issues of website usability, which are particularly relevant with a target audience like SmartChoices’.