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## ACHIEVING CONTINUOUS WEBSITE IMPROVEMENT

By Craig Roth

Web technology is almost 10 years old now, so most large corporations have gone through a few major website redesigns, if not dozens of them. Some of these efforts are tied to rebranding or Mergers and Acquisition activity, while others are about adding deeper content or more interactivity. What these website redesign projects have in common is that they are responses to a specific problem situation that are accordingly addressed as specific one-off solutions. These redesign projects have a fixed scope, timeframe, and budget. Once the project is done, site satisfaction (SiteSat) surveys confirm the new site is vastly improved and better than the competition's and backs are patted heartily ...

... But after a few years enough has changed with the products, company, customer patterns, and competitive environment that an alarm bell goes off again signalling the need for another redesign (see figure 1). And the cycle continues ...

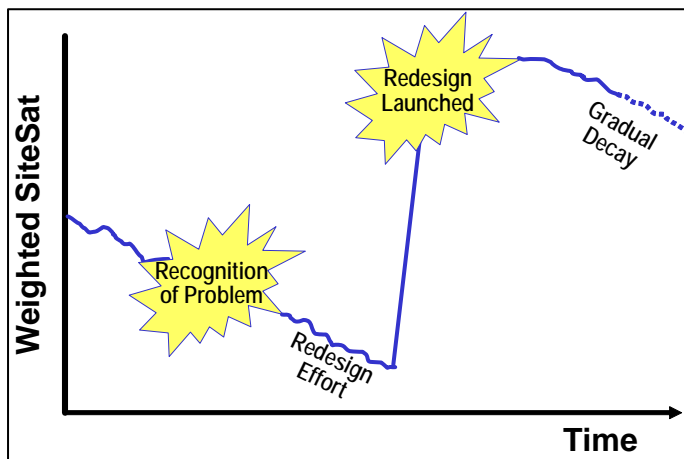


Figure 1 - Typical Website Redesign Cycle

So how does an organization break the cycle of yearly overhauls? KnowledgeForward has created a methodology called Continuous Website Improvement (CWI) to address this issue. The goal of CWI is to keep the day-to-day experience of website users at a constant, high level without requiring yearly heroic intervention.

## FROM TQM TO CONTINUOUS WEBSITE IMPROVEMENT

Continuous Website Improvement applies proven Quality methodology to websites. Continuous improvement, in its generic form, evolved out of the Total Quality Management movement that was introduced to the West in the 1980's through authors such as Imai (*Kaizen: The Key to Japanese Competitive Success*, 1986) and Deming (*Out of the Crisis*, 1986). Imai states that continuous improvement is achieved through a continuing series of minor adjustments that raise performance levels without interruption. This concept of "without interruption" was very different from the major overhauls that processes in the West were often subjected to. Applied to websites, this implies that a continuing series of site improvements can keep website satisfaction at high levels while mimimizing the peaks and valleys of the periodic big-bang redesign approach. From a quantitative point of view, CWI increases the average level of SiteSat while reducing its variance.

Note that this is not about improving the quality/speed of website redesigns. What is needed is the elimination of the concept of website redesigns as one-off, non-repeatable, discrete projects. Websites do not have a standard product cycle like a refrigerator or car where the designer tries to improve on the next model to stay ahead of the competition. Physical goods cannot be changed by their creator once taken home. But websites can change *while the customer is using them*. Quality, Kaizen, and continuous improvement programs were developed to help manufacturing companies improve efficiency and reduce defects up until the customer takes possession of the item (after which the quality burden shifts to service). In the automotive industry, for example, the idea is to hand the customer the keys to the best quality car at the lowest manufacturing cost. Once the car is in the customer's possession, only an extreme quality defect would justify changing the product (a "recall"). However, a website is like a car that can be recalled every day for improvements (not just defects) with minimal inconvenience to the customer and minimal cost to the producer. How would automotive market research, design, and production change if they could magically implement negligible cost recalls daily?

### Behind the Analysis

*A view into the historical and market precedents that guide this analysis:*

**Processes Trump Projects:** Repeatable processes are more efficient than non-repeatable projects since best practices can build over time, pitfalls can be anticipated, and ramp-up time is minimized.

**New Technology Requires Old Disciplines:** Basic Quality methodology can still be useful in a web-oriented world. There is nothing new about this discipline, but applying it to new situations can be challenging.

CWI can provide many benefits, including high levels of user satisfaction, lower disruption to users, higher attainment of the website's goals (information, channel switching, profitability, etc.) – not to mention less late night coffee for the web technicians. But to achieve these benefits, organizations must be self-critical, open to change, driven by metrics, collaborative across organizational boundaries, and customer centric. That is because CWI is a methodology rather than a technology. In many organizations, CWI will be a first foray into a repeatable, metric-driven approach. In companies with entrenched fiefdoms and poor information flows, these changes will take time and commitment from the highest levels of the organization.

Of course there will always be changes that cannot be anticipated and must be responded to with discontinuous improvements. An unforeseen competitor's move or brand new technology can force a major change to the website. Sometimes discontinuous change is intentionally done to get noticed. However, even in those cases, the process of adapting to change can be studied and reaction time can be improved. There will doubtless be future competitive moves and new technologies that will require similar rapid change. Having a standard checklist of quality assurance procedures for a major site change (e.g., run a customer panel, update business metrics, run accessibility analysis, repeat search engine optimization) will help apply lessons learned on previous redesigns.

CWI does not require that the website owner be able to predict every possible occurrence. After all, omniscience unfortunately is in scant supply. What is required is that the website owner is alert, responsive, and dedicated to only being caught off guard once for each change driver. For example, if another part of marketing does research that determines a portion of the site needs to be reworked to solve user frustration, the site owner fixes the immediate problem. Then she puts processes in place to continually review site satisfaction to greatly increase the threshold at which future declines in satisfaction will be noticed.

## THE PROBLEM WITH COMPETITIVE COMPARISONS

Organizations frequently measure their SiteSat against those of competitor's sites. However, if both companies are following the trigger-redesign-decay cycle, these comparisons will tell more about where each company is in the cycle rather than who has the better site. Figure 2 shows two hypothetical companies and overlays their SiteSat metrics over time. At various points, the blue company or the orange company has the better site, although both are

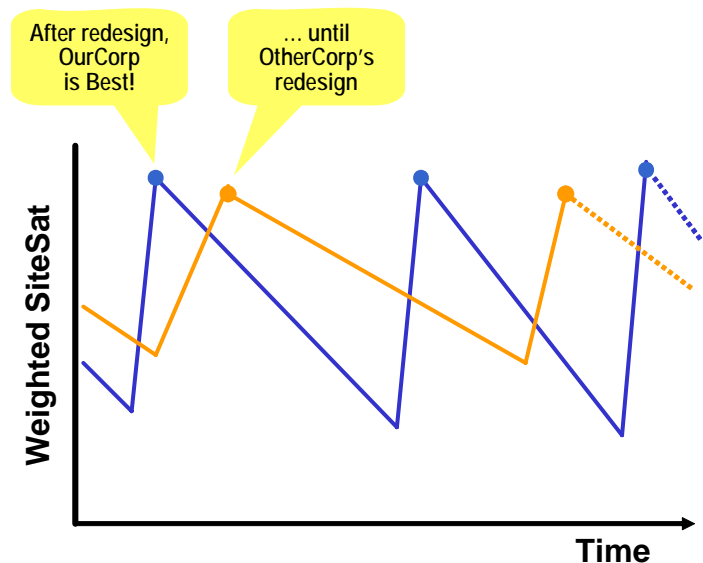


Figure 2 - Competitive Leapfrogging

actually offering the same average level of satisfaction. A true comparison should compare the mean and standard deviation rather than satisfaction at one point in time since a time slice simply compares satisfaction of two sites at random points on the redesign cycle.

There are many web design books and experts that will tell you which fonts look best, whether to use Flash, and how scroll bars should be used. CWI is not a substitute for design heuristics, nor does it eliminate the need for good web designers. It is simply about how to incorporate the best possible design elements in a way that provides the least disruption to user experience, finances, or the lives of the people involved in redesigns. To do otherwise is not a sustainable website strategy.

## CWI FOCUS AREAS

The major areas of focus for CWI should include:

- Goals and Objectives
  - Measuring “improvement” requires a definition of the goals of the website
  - Generally, goals of for-profit organizations boil down to profitability and goals of non-profits boil down to utilization, however this is only a generalization and the goals must be drilled down a few levels to be useful

- Feedback loops:
  - Continuous feedback loops on navigation, content categories, web applications, and content
  - Continuous feedback loops regarding changes in customer segmentation and value
  - Repeatable processes to locate unmet website needs of customers
  - Regular review of weighted website satisfaction. KnowledgeForward believes Weighted SiteSat is the best metric to analyze when examining website redesign statistics. Weighted SiteSat is a weighted average of Website Satisfaction figures by customer pattern and weighted by pattern influence (size, desirability, profitability)
- Links to corporate processes that affect the site:
  - For conglomerates, early notification of M&A activity and a process for incorporating information from new subsidiaries
  - Early awareness of cross-channel sales, service, and marketing initiatives (particularly rebranding) and a repeatable process to respond accordingly
- Governance
  - A Statement of Governance (see KnowledgeForward Opinion “Website Governance: A How-to Guide”) should clearly state ownership and responsibilities related to website information and processes
  - A compliance processes should define how compliance with web guidelines will be checked, the exception process, and how non-compliance will be addressed
- Site Processes:
  - Processes for ensuring freshness of all content
  - Repeatable processes to update the site to reflect product changes
  - Processes for modifying navigation
  - Processes for quickly incorporating changes to categories and taxonomies

- Processes for R&D, allowing for early recognition of technical, design, and functional trends and managing their review and possible incorporation into the website
- Holistic Website Quality:
  - All portions of the site should be exposed to the CWI processes. There should be no silos that would evade continuous improvement processes

**SUMMARY:** Organizations need to break the cycle of one-off, non-repeatable website redesigns – a cycle which results in spikes of improvement followed by gradual decline in user satisfaction. By adapting Total Quality Management techniques, Continuous Website Improvement continually optimizes website processes, communication channels, organizational structures, and technologies exist to maximize website satisfaction and goal attainment.

**ENTERPRISE TAKEAWAY:** Enterprise website owners who have been through multiple major website redesigns should begin to shift attention to how to improve sites between redesigns with the eventual goal of minimizing the frequency of major redesigns and maximizing the average site satisfaction. If creative agencies are used for website redesigns, they should be incorporated on a recurring or retainer relationship to encourage regular updating of the website.

**VENDOR TAKEAWAY:** We have already observed a shift from development-time tools (website creation and staging) to run-time tools (web content management, site analytics). This trend will continue, requiring vendors to respond with tools that allow more surgical alterations to existing sites and support run-time or maintenance activities.

## KnowledgeForward

How KnowledgeForward can help with the issues addressed in this Opinion:

- **Feedback Loop Analysis:** Examine how internal/external environmental changes result in website changes
- **SiteSat Pattern Analysis:** Implement metrics to generate Weighted SiteSat metrics and past redesigns to identify spikiness
- **Organizational Analysis:** Compare to best practices for governance, federation, design ownership, etc.

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