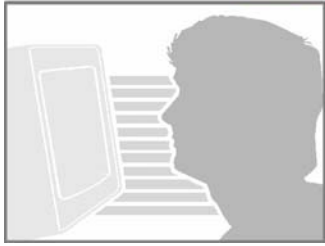


# Usability Interface



Newsletter of the Usability and User Experience Community



Mini Issue, Volume 11, Issue 3 | February 2005

## Usability of U.S. Presidential Candidate Blogs—Why It Matters

By Thomas Russo

When it comes to the usability of the presidential candidates' blogs (i.e. web log), we liked the Dean, Kerry, Kucinich, Sharpton and Bush-Cheney blogs. However, they all need some work from a usability standpoint. Applying good usability practices would make better use of campaign funds, attract young voters, and give candidates a better idea of what is important to the electorate.

### Fast Forward to the Blogs

We felt like we were being hit by a flood of information on all of the blogs. The exception was Al Sharpton's site, which is really a Web site. The best blogs were well organized, had the candidate's posts, or just simply asked users for their thoughts. The worst blogs were exactly the opposite.

In an earlier post on our blog, we actually asked users to rate the candidates' blogs, but few did. So we thought we would share our thoughts on the blogs' usability for the next generation of presidential candidate bloggers, blog designers, and campaign managers.

### Howard Dean Blog

The Dean blog ([www.blogforamerica.com/](http://www.blogforamerica.com/)) generated a great deal of excitement, despite some real usability problems. The excitement of the campaign and candidate really comes through when you view the individual posts. However, you have to have excellent eyesight to read this blog. The text is very small, and you can't make it larger by changing your browser's text size. The designers were probably told that everything had to fit on the home page.

After feverishly looking for Dean's posts, we found them well hidden on the lower right side of the homepage under "Archives by Category." There are 26 links under that heading and we managed to find "Howard's Posts." Honestly, if we had not been evaluating the blog, we would have given up. Some of the most valuable content that a candidate blog offers is the candidate's posts. Users should be able to easily find these posts.

The Dean blog contains a great deal of information. We didn't find a "search" box on the blog, although there was one on the campaign Web site. It was hidden on the left side toward the bottom of the page. We typed in "Howard's Posts" but didn't find them.

Atomz ([www.atomz.com/applications/search/trial.htm](http://www.atomz.com/applications/search/trial.htm)) provides a free search engine (Express Search) for this purpose.

The blog's general organization is OK, but we were distracted by the images on the right side of the page. We had to scroll horizontally, which drove us crazy after awhile. We were also bothered by the absence of a date by each post, although there was a time stamp. You have to click on the main link to see the date. This is poor design.

### John Kerry Blog

The Kerry blog (<http://blog.johnkerry.com/>) is well-designed and easy to navigate. We give good grades to the V2 Group, Form and the Internet Team. We especially liked the text box that sorted categories like issues, news, blog, and calendar. This made it easy for first time users to get acquainted with the blog, and to get information quickly.

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## **Usability of U.S. Presidential Candidate Blogs**

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We couldn't find any posts by John Kerry, despite using the search box that is located toward the end of the page. We think that a candidate's posts should be front-and-center and highlighted in the blog. We liked the post entitled "Share Your Ideas." Also we couldn't help but notice that Dick Bell was the major force behind the posting. Great job there.

The Kerry blog could be improved by allowing users to change the text size and moving the search engine to the upper right corner of the page.

## **Dennis Kucinich Blog**

The Kucinich blog ([www.denniskucinich.us/](http://www.denniskucinich.us/)) is pretty decent. It suffers from poor organization, but makes up for it in content. It is the only blog that contains his posts in a text box marked "Kucinich Blog Entries." However, we wish that the box was higher on the page so that users could easily spot it.

Users on the Kucinich blog may have a difficult time reading the blog postings. This is due to the long line length and italicized text. Both of these features make scanning the blog much more difficult. Also, users can't adjust the text size.

## **Reverend Al Sharpton Web site**

The Reverend Al Sharpton does not have a blog. However, his campaign Web site ([www.sharpton2004.org/](http://www.sharpton2004.org/)) is simple and elegant. It makes good use of graphics, and tells you what the candidate wants to do. Initially, we couldn't read the "Rev. Al Sharpton's Top Ten" list since the text was very small. However, we were able to increase the text size on our browser and got into the content.

## **Other Candidates' Blogs**

### **John Edwards**

We were very disappointed with the Edwards blog (<http://blog.johnedwards2004.com/index.shtml>). You are assaulted by banners whose goal is to get you to create a free account. This was annoying. We wanted to learn about the Senator and not create an account—at least, not right away.

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## George Bush and Dick Cheney

The Bush-Cheney blog ([www.georgewbush.com/blog/](http://www.georgewbush.com/blog/)) was well-organized, and basically what we expected. You can easily keep track of things, and the blog

Any blog with this much information needs a good search feature includes a useful calendar feature. It is packed with information, much of it repeated on the campaign Web site and in the media. It's probably not fair to expect the Leader of the Free World to post blog entries. In reality, everything the President says is weighed and analyzed to death by the media and world. He can't afford to be as informal as his opponents.

## Why is Blog Usability Important?

Blog usability is important for several reasons. Most important, there is no good reason why blogs should have poor usability features and not provide users with a good experience. There is a great body of knowledge available from the government at [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov) and usability experts. We've summarized the important points on our Web site ([www.millennialliving.com/Webusability/whyusabilityimportant.htm](http://www.millennialliving.com/Webusability/whyusabilityimportant.htm)).

Another reason why blog usability is important is due to the public funding of a number candidates' blogs. The Federal Election Commission approved over \$15 million to candidates through the Matching Funds Program ([www.fec.gov/press/20031230certification.html](http://www.fec.gov/press/20031230certification.html)). It is reasonable to assume that some money has probably been used to fund blogs. Howard Dean, John Kerry, and President Bush did not participate in the program. However, we still think those who contributed to their campaigns would prefer that the money be used wisely.

Blogs have also attracted young people and are a good tool to restore confidence in government and our leaders. In fact, a recent survey ([www.youngcitizensurvey.org/](http://www.youngcitizensurvey.org/)) (see Qs. 55-65) by the Campaign for Young Voters showed that blogs were among the most popular things a candidate or political organization could do to reach young people using Internet technologies. Blogs were also among the least likely to turn young people off.

Blogs are great tools for tapping into voters' mind sets. Blogs might originally have been meant to be used publish a journal or one's thoughts about a topic without having to be a technology expert. However, blogs are now morphing into vehicles that provide a more personal exchange with candidates or other voters of like mind.

The number of comments on the candidates' blogs proves this point. Some comments number in the hundreds.

Candidates can learn a great deal about voters by mining the information in their blogs and in others' blogs. Whether candidates are doing this information mining is uncertain. Many blogs are using polls to gauge public opinion on issues. We have to wonder, though, whether any of the candidates or their parties are really trying to make sense of the information. ☞

**Please comment on our usability review  
and if you like, review and rate the  
candidates' blogs.**

See [www.millennialliving.com/e-democracy/presidentialweblogs.htm](http://www.millennialliving.com/e-democracy/presidentialweblogs.htm)

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## *We've Transformed*

The Usability SIG was one of the first SIGs invited to re-charter as a new STC Community. Our new name is the STC Usability and User Experience (UUX) Community.

## *Awards and Recognition*

Each year, the Usability and User Experience bestows the Distinguished SIG Service Award to a volunteer to honor his/her work in service to the STC and the Community. This year the 2005 Distinguished SIG Service Award goes to two deserving members:

- ❑ **Chauncey Wilson, Past Manager and Discussion List Coordinator.** In recognition for his steadfast support of STC Usability and User Experience and in recognition of his many contributions as a mentor and leader in the community.
- ❑ **Allen Rotz, Washington DC Usability SIG leader.** In recognition for his steadfast leadership of the Washington DC Usability SIG and for enthusiastically giving so much time, effort, and creativity to STC.

For more information about the Usability and User Experience awards and recognition, see [www.stcsig.org/usability/about/awards.html](http://www.stcsig.org/usability/about/awards.html).

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