

Agency Website Critique:
Through the Perspectives of Senior Citizens and their Caregivers

Rosalie Beauchamp

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Dr. Genie Stowers

San Francisco State University

Introduction

This agency website critique focuses on an important part of the American population; senior citizens and the people who care for them. This paper serves as a critique of four websites that are designed to assist seniors and their caregivers with improving their quality of life both medically and financially; ensuring that this population has the resources that they need to be as healthy and independent as possible. Two agency websites that will be critiqued in this paper are very popular federal websites: the Social Security website (www.ssa.gov) and the Medicare website (www.medicare.gov). The remaining two agency websites, while equally important, serve a smaller population of seniors and their caregivers: the North Bay Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org/northbay) and the Council on Aging, a non-profit organization, operated out of Sonoma County (www.councilonaging.com).

These four agencies are all similar, in that they strive to enhance, improve or simply help to maintain senior citizens and their caregiver's lives. The main criteria that I am seeking to determine in each of these websites include if the websites are visibly accessible, that the end-user [senior citizens] can actually perform tasks on-line and that the site provides useful resources for senior citizens and their caregiver's. It is important that there is an educational benefit that seniors and their caregivers receive when navigating these sites. While it is true that the internet has not become a profound resource for senior citizens, it would be ideal that the end users of these sites (seniors and their caregiver's) felt comfortable enough that they could return to and rely on these sites in the future. Ultimately, these sites would be deemed useful if seniors and their caregivers continue to visit them and feel confident about recommending the sites to their friends and community members as a helpful or possibly life-changing resource.

The Social Security website (www.ssa.gov)

Easy to Read, Easy to Understand

Senior citizens and their caregivers would probably consider the Social Security site a useful and fairly easy site to navigate and find resources that they may need. Many seniors are understandably vision challenged and can benefit greatly from the enlarged text feature. The homepage has an option right on the top right hand corner that can change text sizes; this link explains how to change text sizes. The link also has a large magnifying glass icon on it, to provide the user association with vision and text size. Once the text link is pressed, there are specific instructions to change the text size. Seniors and their caregivers would probably find that the directions to change the text are fairly understandable. The range of text sizes that social security's website offers range from ten-point type to seventy-two point type-which provides plenty of size variation. The site also explains that the end-user has several ways that they can change the text size, users can either use their mouse, use their browser settings or they can use the web eyes plug-in that can be downloaded for free. The enlarged text option not only assists seniors with being able to navigate around the Social Security site without visual discomfort, it also can help caregivers teach seniors to use the site independently.

What On-line Tasks a Senior Citizen can Accomplish

Social Security's homepage offers a link that will explain to the end-user what they can accomplish on-line. Seniors can perform a plethora of tasks on the social security website. Some of the on-line tasks that end-users can perform on-line include applying for benefits, replacing a social security card and other administrative tasks such as checking your claim status and changing your name or address on your social security account. The end-user not only can view a list of what can be done on the social security website, they can also save time by seeing what

they *cannot* do on-line on the social security website. Being so specific, by explaining what the end-user cannot do on the website proves to be helpful and can save a lot of time and confusion.

Resources that Seniors and their Caregivers May find Helpful on the Site

When navigating the Social Security website, senior citizens and their caregivers can find many different helpful resources. Seniors can plan their retirement and calculate future Social Security benefits which can help forecast future payments and help for secure financial planning. Seniors can obtain information about how to report the death of their spouse and find information on how to receive their deceased spouse's benefits. In addition to resources directly related to the Social Security administration, the website has links to other valuable resources that seniors may benefit from. The Social Security site has links to Medicare, Medicaid and CMS services. The site provides Medicare links that provide information for seniors who may need to replace their Medicare card or contact a representative about Medicare billing issues. The Social Security site also offers links for seniors who desire information about the Medicare prescription drug plan. The site also offers useful information on the new federal updates concerning the changes in retirement age. The site explains to seniors (or caregivers preparing to retire) that the full retirement age is increasing and provides a link to calculate exactly when the end-user can retire and draw from Social Security. The calculator on the Social Security website provides an age/benefit ratio for seniors or their caregivers who may be considering retirement. Another valuable resource that seniors may find helpful on the Social Security website is the option to sign up for SSA's electronic newsletter and the option to receive updates by mail.

Weaknesses and Opportunities

The Social Security website is very helpful and comprehensive in regards to assisting senior citizens and their caregivers. It is quite a challenge to identify weaknesses in this site.

However, the site can appear quite overwhelming for a senior citizen; there are such a number of options and links to navigate that a senior could possibly get lost on the site and give up their search. While there are targeted audience links on this site, the site has the potential to further specify targeted audience links that may be helpful to senior citizens such as a link titled “information for seniors,” or “65 and older.” This site has the opportunity to reach out to senior citizens by providing direct links to resources and information that may be pertinent to them. Since most social security recipients are senior citizens, it would be a good opportunity for social security to provide a targeted link for seniors in order for them to access information and resources that would be pertinent to their needs.

The Medicare Website: www.medicare.gov

Bold Font, Format and Many Educational Opportunities

Senior citizens are generally extremely dependent on Medicare as their primary means of medical insurance. Most senior citizens and their caregivers would benefit from visiting this site. This site appears to be very visually appealing for seniors and provides opportunities for learning about the Medicare benefit and Medicare drug prescription programs. The font on the home page and the majority of the site is bold and over twelve points. The links on the site are very easy to read and interpret. Links are simplified in categories such as: billing, prescription drug plan, find a doctor and preventative services. The site also offers a screen reader option that could be beneficial to seniors by simply listing, vertically, all the links on the homepage without graphics or color. By placing the links vertically, seniors may become less distracted by all the links that are listed in various locations on the homepage, which could potentially avoid confusion. End-users on the Medicare website can perform many on-line activities such as find a physician, change their address, get a replacement card, and enroll in prescription drug plans and Medicare

health plans. There is a comprehensive tool on this site that helps a senior or their caregiver identify and plan long term care. This tool is very specific and results in a listing of some of the long term care needs that a senior citizen or their caregiver should consider, such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities or in-home care giving. The long term care comprehensive planning tool helps seniors to determine if they may be eligible or qualify for certain services. The Medicare website also proves to be a very helpful educational component for seniors and their caregivers by providing a specific listing of plans that Medicare honors in different geographic regions in the United States. The insurance plan listings on the website also provide plan names and ID numbers for supplemental insurance as well as a listing of monthly premiums, annual deductibles and gap coverage's.

Weaknesses and Opportunities

Most of the on-line forms that a senior citizen or their caregiver would want to attain at this site are only PDF's, meaning that they would have to complete the forms, print out the forms and send them away. Finding and printing out the forms can be extremely time consuming and the majority of the forms offered on the Medicare website, can only be found by being redirected to the CMS website. Additionally, end-users cannot file a claim form on-line nor can they submit an appeal form on-line which makes the process daunting. It is suggested that the site not only list what the end user can do on the site, but it may save time for the end user if there were a list of things that the end user cannot do on the site (similar to Social Security's website). The "frequently asked questions" link is confusing, in that the link takes the end-user to four hundred and forty seven questions that the end-user would have to sift through in order to find the information they were seeking. Possibly, the frequently asked questions section could be slimmed down or categorized to make the question search easier.

Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org.norcal)

Easy to Understand and Interpret

Many seniors are currently facing either the onset of Alzheimer's disease or have loved ones who are unfortunately enduring this disease. The Northern California Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org) offers a website that serves as a support and resource to people who are facing the disease. The Alzheimer's Association website states that the site not only represents Northern California, but it also represents Northern Nevada. The Northern California Alzheimer's Association's website appears simple and organized as far as the links are concerned. When arriving at this site, seniors may find that it is easy to find exactly what they are looking for because the site is very simplified and contains clear cut links. All specific links such as, support group, education, volunteering and donation links are organized vertically on the left side of the homepage. There is another horizontal link bar at the top of the homepage that has easy to access drop down menus. The horizontal links list broader topics such as information about the disease and how to cope through living with Alzheimer's. The middle of the homepage lists highlights, news, current events and community resources that seniors or their caregivers may find helpful. Once a link on the homepage has been activated, each page has a text size option. The Alzheimer's Association website provides the option of having three different text sizes: normal, medium and large. Once the end user clicks on what size text they desire, the webpage immediately changes the text. This option is very easy for seniors who have vision problems and may not know how to maneuver their browser settings or download the web eyes plug-in.

Online Tasks, Useful Resources and Educational Tools

Seniors and their caregivers can perform many different tasks on www.alz.org.norcal. End-users can donate to the association on-line; they also can write Congress in support of increased funding for research and protection of Alzheimer's programs, register for a public policy forum in Washington D.C., sign up for the annual Memory Walk fundraiser, or simply find office locations and contact numbers. There are many links on the site that provide educational information about the actual disease and its processes. The site provides specific definitions of Alzheimer's disease, as well as, the symptoms, risk factors, treatments and stages of the disease. This site is quite comprehensive as far as being an educational support and tool for seniors and their caregivers. This site is helpful for caregivers who may not fully understand what Alzheimer's disease is or how to cope with the disease. This site provides caregivers with information about living with the disease, caring for loved ones, finding the right caregiver, message boards, and help line information. Aside from actual on-line educational tools, this site provides information about community educational programs that focus on memory loss, dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The site also provides dates, times and information about community workshops and conferences. There are many different locations and times that caregivers and seniors can choose in order to attend a community educational program to learn about Alzheimer's. The site is helpful, in that it provides many different opportunities for seniors and caregivers to learn about the disease either on-line or through community outreach.

Weaknesses and Opportunities

While the homepage is very easy to comprehend and navigate, the font coloring is grey and the whole color scheme appears very light and filled with pastel coloring. The coloring on the site may be difficult for a senior citizen to see. It may be beneficial to change the font

coloring to a bolder color, possibly black. Additionally, the text size option is helpful, but is only offered if the end-user chooses a link on the homepage to get to a webpage that offers the text size feature. It would be helpful to place the text size option on the homepage itself, to help senior citizens be aware that the feature even exists. A typical senior may discover the Alzheimer's Association homepage, only to find that they cannot read the font because of the light coloring and then find that they cannot change the text size; if this happens, the result may be that a senior citizen may avoid the site altogether. It was disappointing that the site did not provide map links to the different locations of each office. It would be helpful if the site could offer maps to conferences, workshops, training programs and offices because there are so many locations that these different educational opportunities are offered, it could get confusing for seniors or the caregivers that may have to provide transportation. In the future, this website may consider dividing into two different websites; one for Northern California and one for Northern Nevada. The site seems to offer many resources for Northern California but lacked resources for Northern Nevada. This site could be confusing for seniors and caregivers who are looking specifically for resources in Northern Nevada. Northern Nevada may not have a large population, but it could be linked with Nevada's Alzheimer's Association, or another Alzheimer's association in Nevada or the Northwest.

The Council on Aging in Sonoma County CA: www.councilonaging.com

A One Stop Shop for Sonoma County Senior Resources and Education

The Council on Aging in Sonoma County is a one-stop shop for senior citizens and their caregivers who wish to find support and community resources within Sonoma County. The website is nicely organized and is rather simplified, listing the majority of community resources in Sonoma County that a senior citizen could utilize. The homepage is rather simplified and

straightforward with easy to read, understandable links. Senior citizens and their caregivers can attain information about senior dining rooms, senior day activities and legal services on the provided links. For seniors and their caregivers who seek assistance from Meals on Wheels, there is a detailed webpage that explains the Sonoma County Meals on Wheels program, along with menus, eligibility requirements and frequently asked questions. There is also a section that details fundraising dates and information. One very interesting part of the site is the Council on Aging's very own blog. Seniors and their caregivers can learn new perspectives by reading the blog. Many seniors and caregivers may consider the blog entertaining, thought provoking, supportive and informative. There is a list of many helpful community links on this site including AARP, The Redwood Caregivers Resource Center, Social Security on-line and transportation information for public transportation.

Weaknesses and Opportunities

The Council on Aging website understandably serves fewer seniors and their caregivers than the previous three websites in this critique, but this site has opportunities for improvement. For visual purposes, the site could benefit from using a larger font (above twelve point) in order to assist seniors with being able to see it more clearly, or it could at least offer the larger font option. The homepage also showcases touching testimonials of seniors who benefit from the Council on Aging Programs. This site has the opportunity to list testimonials and stories from volunteers and caregivers who are involved in the center as well. Providing testimonials about other people involved in the center, such as caregivers and volunteers, may increase the organizations volunteer base and help caregivers become more involved with the organizations operations. Caregiver and volunteer testimonials may also help donors feel satisfied that their donations were well spent; prompting them to donate more. Since there are many community

activities listed on the site, rather than listing all the activities by date, this site could benefit from an on-line activities calendar. Seniors and their caregivers can print out the on-line activities calendar and have a clear reference point of up-coming events. Another opportunity/weakness that was identified was when seniors and their caregivers want to post a comment, question or complaint to the Council on Aging, there is only a phone number or an e-mail address. This site could benefit from having an on-line request, question, comment or complaint form which would be useful for the agency to track and forward to the appropriate department or contact person.

Conclusion

All of the websites explored in this critique have proved to be more than adequate for senior citizens and their caregivers. It is recommended that all websites that cater to senior citizens be visibly accessible, easy to understand, easy to navigate and have the potential to have on-line tasks accessible. The internet can prove to be a valuable resource to seniors and their caregivers, by empowering them to learn about financial, medical and support services. This critique finds that the more intricate and hard to understand a website appears, a senior is probably less likely to want to explore it. By providing the option for large text, offering educational information and tasks that can be performed on-line, a senior citizen and their caregiver will continue to want to utilize these sites and recommend them to their friends and community members.

References

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