

Case Study: Autism Society of America

A nonprofit organization's Web site redesign project based on data-driven user experience research

Introduction

A Web site that educates visitors around a mission and ultimately converts visitors into donors and loyal long-term advocates doesn't just happen. With the increased competition for market share online, nonprofit organizations need to communicate with their specific constituencies in ways that truly engage and compel them to take action. Whether the goal is to drive greater constituent engagement, promote a sense of online community, and/or to build relationships that strengthen donor conversion, organizations need to marry the needs of their constituents with their organization's goals.

Consider this: User behavior research shows today that 50 percent of Web visitors go to a home page, and then immediately leave to another Web site. Also, when visitors spend time on a Web site, the most popular action is the "back" button on the browser.

So organizations should ask themselves: Can visitors find out how to donate when asked? Can visitors easily sign up for a newsletter or other offering? Are visitors going to the content the organization thinks is most important? By optimizing the user experience and creating clear, interactive and informational pathways that move constituents strategically through an organization's Web site and emails, a nonprofit can achieve stronger success toward achieving its goals.

This case study describes how the Autism Society of America worked with Convio to redesign its Web site by beginning with a data-driven user experience audit called a Web Site Expert Review (see page 8 for more information about this service). Using this approach, Autism Society of America gained insight and valuable information to determine content priorities and develop an information architecture that will engage the organization's key audiences and improve their user experience.

Note: Throughout this case study, you will notice words or phrases that appear in bold type. These terms are defined on page 9.

About Autism Society of America

The oldest, largest membership organization dedicated to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the Autism Society of America (ASA) has 190,000 members and supporters, with 182 chapters across the country and 29 international affiliated parent organizations. Before 2007, ASA was consistently ranked first or second on Google searches for the keyword "autism". ASA was the only national group dedicated to ASD. Its fundraising initiatives were paper driven. ASA had a toll-free help line (1-800-3Autism), and chapters were launching their own Web sites at a rapid pace.

In 2007, the Centers for Disease Control announced that there was a 1 in 150 prevalence of ASD, triggering major media coverage in early 2007 that quadrupled ASA's Web traffic. Despite this, ASA saw little conversion, and its rankings on Google's search engine dropped to third or fourth.

ASA's Director of Communications Marguerite Kirst-Colston took notice of the declining search engine rankings and determined the organization's battle plan would be "Search — Convert — and Conquer," commencing a Web Site Expert Review with Convio that had three goals:

- to improve ASA's search engine rankings,
- to improve a site visitor's experience, and
- to increase ASA's donor conversion.

Optimizing for Google and More

The ASA's home page presented several challenges (See Fig. 1). The name of the organization was not immediately clear, nor was the organization's purpose and mission prevalent on the page. In addition, ASA's home page did not indicate the organization's priorities nor did it give site visitors clear guidance on where to go or what to do.

To optimize its search engine rankings, ASA needed to create an information portal that gave its constituents what they needed to live with autism today and a way for them to get involved to find solutions. Toward that goal, ASA needed to:

- create a **user experience** that would support and promote conversion;
- develop an effective infrastructure for search engine marketing and optimization;
- build an online community for ASA's changing constituency, which was becoming more international and expanding to include professionals and more adults on the ASD spectrum; and
- identify tools to deepen constituent relationship management (CRM).



Fig. 1 — Autism Society of America Home Page: Before

Discovery Process

The first step in the redesign process was to analyze ASA’s audience. ASA held focus groups, conducted intensive **stakeholder interviews** and developed user personas. With this information, ASA was able to create “functional use cases” that helped determine what these personas (e.g., a caregiver of someone who has autism) would do once they got to ASA’s Web site, or better yet, what ASA would want them to do. The functional use cases helped ASA focus its goals for each user persona to inform ASA’s Web site layout.

The discovery process also included an inventory of ASA’s content. ASA conducted a **card sort** usability exercise involving constituents who did not participate in the focus groups. A card sort test helps organizations observe their constituents by organizing content around terminology that resonates with them personally. This exercise helps nonprofits break out of using jargon that may be unintentionally driven by departments or internal stakeholders. In addition to a card sort test, ASA conducted an **editorial gap analysis**, which led to the development of a content plan.

As the final step in the discovery process, ASA conducted a usability assessment that involved a **heuristic** (expert) **evaluation** of the organization’s current Web site and a site path analysis using Google Analytics and AWSTATS site traffic data.

Information Architecture

The information gleaned from the discovery process helped ASA to develop a new **information architecture** — a new site structure and navigation schema that included plans for a more interactive design to support overall organizational messaging and fundraising objectives.

Critical to the information architecture development process is the creation of a user decision path (see Fig. 2), which shows how users would navigate the organization’s Web site based on how they identified themselves according to audience-based qualities and what questions they would ask upon visiting the Web site.

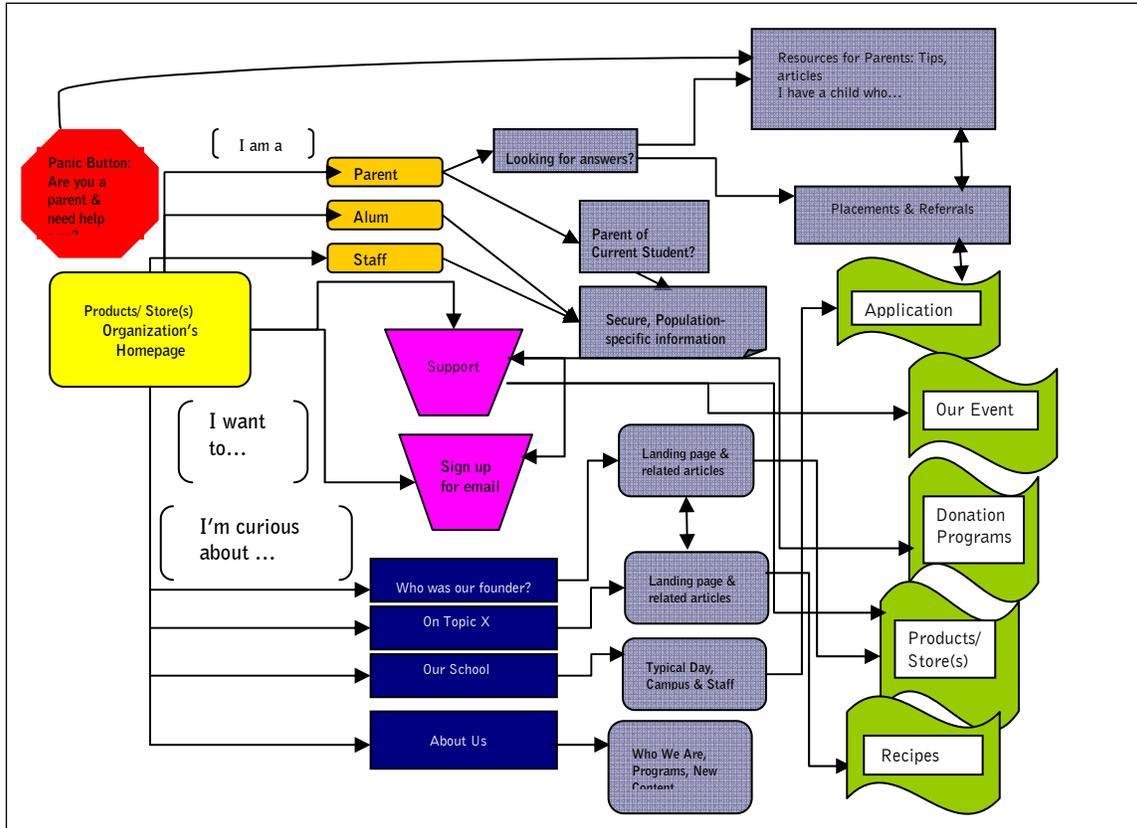
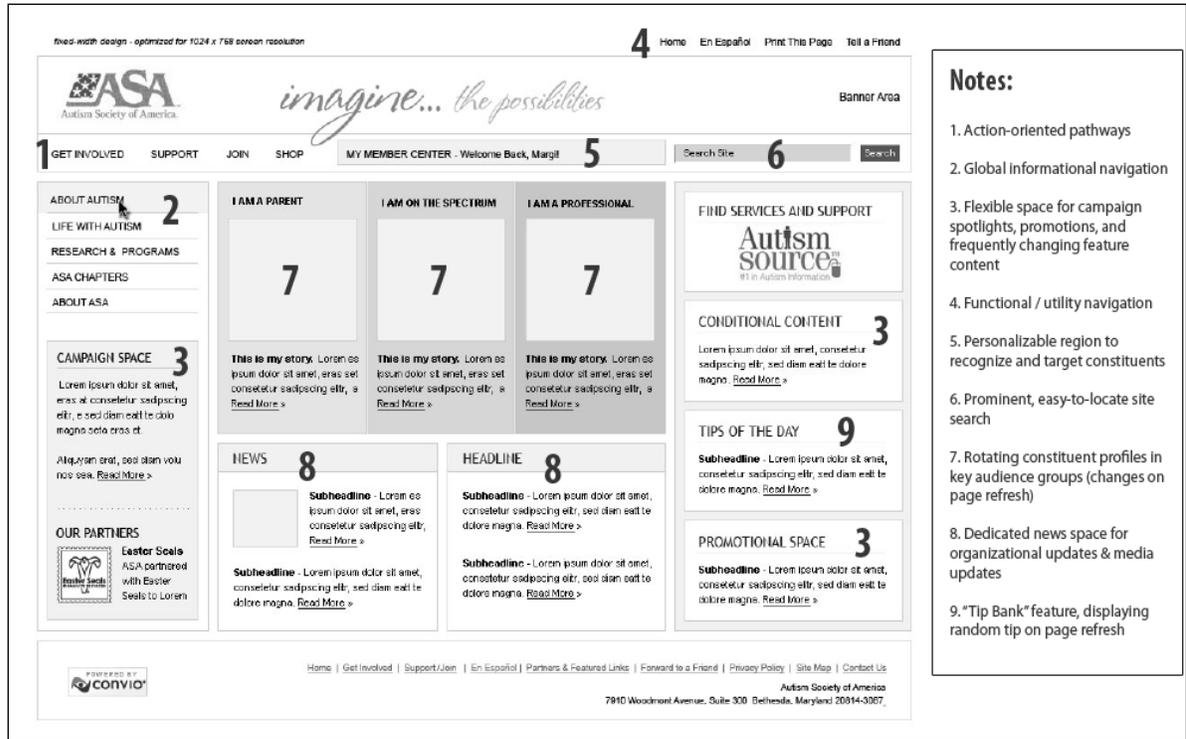


Fig. 2 — Pathway Mapping: Understanding Users’ Decision-Making

The user decision path shows how ASA’s content should be structured, providing multiple pathways to the organization’s information resources that meet the specific browsing context of each type of visitor/audience.

This new information led to the creation of **wireframes** (see Fig. 3) of ASA’s Web site. After an additional round of **usability testing** on the new layout, a **visual design** was developed. ASA then tested its site prototype (see Fig. 4) with constituents and conducted quality assurance testing using browsers and platforms that fit with the specific audience personas defined in the usability analysis.



- Notes:**
1. Action-oriented pathways
 2. Global informational navigation
 3. Flexible space for campaign spotlights, promotions, and frequently changing feature content
 4. Functional / utility navigation
 5. Personalizable region to recognize and target constituents
 6. Prominent, easy-to-locate site search
 7. Rotating constituent profiles in key audience groups (changes on page refresh)
 8. Dedicated news space for organizational updates & media updates
 9. "Tip Bank" feature, displaying random tip on page refresh

Fig. 3 — Wireframe – ASA Home Page

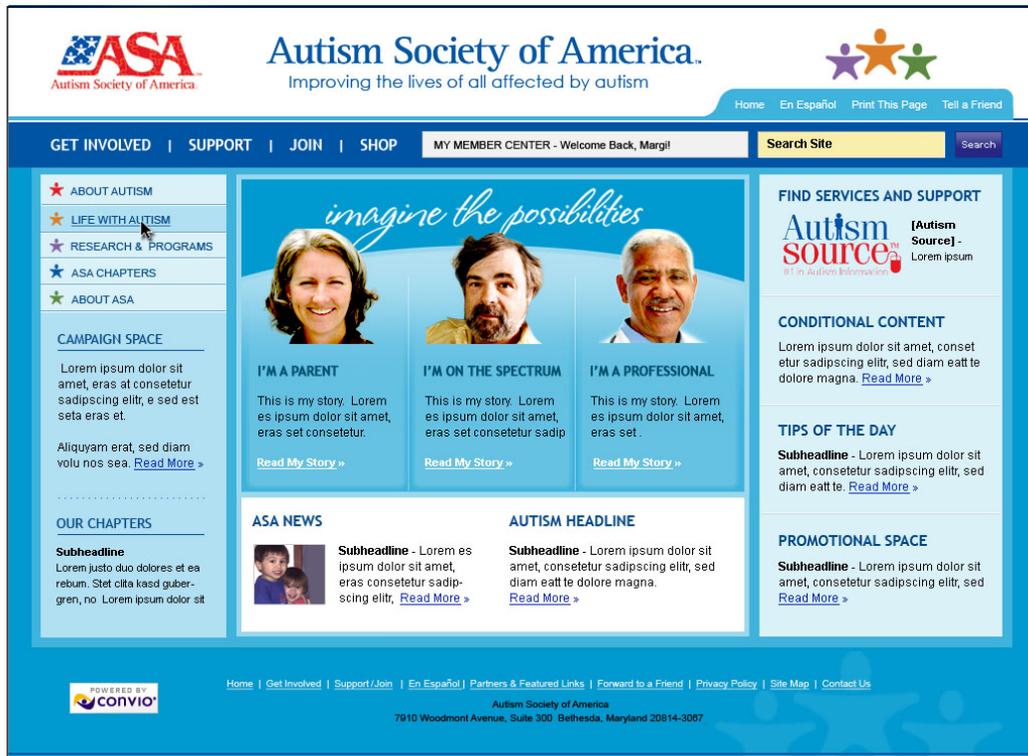


Fig. 4 — Autism Society of America Home Page: After

Lessons Learned

With a modest budget, ASA undertook a thorough user experience audit that served as the foundation for creating a strategic plan for its Web site.

“Convio's intensive Web site audit helped us determine how to best engage our key audiences and improve their user experience,” Kirst-Colston said. “We feel that ASA's new information architecture and redesign will improve our search engine rankings, increase donor conversions and enable our constituents to easily find the critical information they need. Our work with Convio to understand best practices in online strategy has given ASA the ability to develop stronger online relationships with our constituents and drive results.”

A veteran of supervising several Web site redesigns, Kirst-Colston recommends that organizations create a Web site that is “flexible and adaptable for growth, even if you don’t know what’s ahead.” Rather than redesign a Web site every two or three years, Kirst-Colston advises organizations to do their homework up-front with the appropriate user experience research rather than jump to new designs. Resisting that urge and doing it right will ensure long term scalability and solid results.

A Convio Web Site Expert Review

An intensive process focused on data and user research, a Convio Web Site Expert Review gives organizations insight and valuable information to verify the effectiveness of a new design, evaluate an existing design, or know what needs to be done before investing in a major redesign initiative.

A Web Site Expert Review involves working with a credentialed information architect who analyzes an organization's Web site against key criteria — usability, ease of navigation, task flow, page layout and accessibility — to provide content priorities and an information architecture that will engage key audiences and improve their online experience.

A Web Site Expert Review is valuable during any phase of an organization's Web site design lifecycle. It can help shed light on successes and current challenges, be used as a stand-alone process to understand what's working and what isn't, and/or provide information before investing in a major redesign initiative.

Focusing on data and user research, a Web Site Expert Review prescribes the right combination of techniques for an organization's unique needs, and then applies these techniques to make specific recommendations on site layout and content presentation that result in "stickier" Web sites with higher conversion rates.

A Web Site Expert Review may include:

- intensive discovery sessions with stakeholders to discuss and build consensus around target audience, marketing, education, advocacy and/or fundraising objectives;
- an analysis of content and audience using focus groups, surveys and user personae;
- a heuristic evaluation (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heuristic_evaluation) to identify usability problems and best practices opportunities in the user interface (UI) design;
- testing with representative constituents, using such processes as usability testing, card sorting, eye tracking and use case definition;
- data collection and analysis of site traffic, user pathway and user decision charting, and recommendations for low-investment/high return next steps to improve the Web site, plus a roadmap for an extended site improvement project.

To find out more about how Convio can help your organization increase the effectiveness and success of your Web site, contact us today.



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Methodology

Discovery

- Content Inventory
- Stakeholder Interviews
- User Interviews and Surveys

Information Architecture and Usability

- Site Pathway Analysis
- Card Sort Testing
- Usability Heuristic Review
- Sitemap and Navigation Schema Development
- User Process Testing

Creative and Editorial Services

- Wireframing
- Editorial Gap Analysis
- Visual Design

Implementation Services

- Technical Planning
- Functional Build
- Quality Assurance

Glossary

Card Sort Testing

Conducted typically after an inventory of a web site's content, card sort testing helps organizations observe their own constituents by grouping content around terminology that personally resonates with them. This exercise helps organizations get away from using jargon that may be unintentionally driven by departments or internal stakeholders.

Editorial Gap Analysis

To assess content needs, a gap analysis is performed to analyze content holes, envision future areas for growth and opportunity help create an editorial plan to drive content creation, map old content to the new structure, and develop a consensus around business rules concerning content updates post-launch. A gap analysis helps to make recommendations on which content should be retired and what new content needs to be drafted.

Heuristic Evaluation

"Rule of thumb," established guidelines against which a site's effectiveness can be evaluated quickly. A heuristic evaluation is an expert analysis of potential problem areas resulting in high-level recommendations for ways to improve the site.

Information Architecture

The creation of clear, interactive and informational pathways to move constituents strategically through your website and emails.

Stakeholder Interviews

The process of meeting with key internal web site stakeholders to evaluate past audience hierarchies, understand how the organization's constituencies and priorities have evolved, and prioritize objectives for making important site decisions. These interviews begin the process of consensus-building within an organization.

Usability Testing

The structured observation of key, representative constituents performing targeted tasks on your website. Scalable to all levels, from a complex website structure to paper mockups to micro-task measurement, usability testing is critical for uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of a web site's architecture and design.

User Experience

Incorporating an organization's goals and strategy into a proven user research methodology to collect constituents' needs and goals for using your web site and emails.

Visual Design

The process of creating the look-and-feel, tone, brand and color schema for a website to "lay on top of" a layout and information architecture once the key interactions for the website have been defined.

Wireframing

More cost efficient to revise outside of visual design process, wireframing prioritizes real estate before visual design with a simplified view of what content will appear on each screen and documents use cases and outcomes. The wireframe shows a site's layout without such visual elements as color, style and branding.