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Development of a Dairy Management Information Web Site

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Development of a Dairy Management Information Web Site

Abstract

"The Dairy Manager" Web site was developed to provide producers access to current, reliable management information. The site is designed for efficient use by the producer or county Extension educator and contains compiled, reviewed, specific, and current dairy management information. The site is updated frequently and a panel of experts in various fields related to dairy production and management review the material prior to posting to the Web site.

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Introduction

The Internet has transformed the way people access information and has created opportunities for distribution of general and scientific information in areas such as education, business, government, and health care (Lawrence & Giles, 1999). However, a major disadvantage of an Internet search is the time required to sift through a myriad of unorganized sites returned from a typical search to find pertinent information.

The amount of publicly available information on the Web has increased rapidly (Lawrence & Giles, 1998b). The Web's doubling period was under 3 months the second half of 1993, nearly 5 months in 1995, and under 6 months during 1997 (Gray, 1997). The percent of commercial sites increased in a 4-year period from 1.5% of all sites in 1993 to nearly 63% in 1997 (Grey, 1997). Estimates from February 1999, showed the publicly indexable Web containing approximately 800 million pages, with 83% of the sites containing commercial content and 6% containing scientific content (Lawrence & Giles, 1999). Because of the Web's rapid growth and dynamic nature, search engine coverage relative to size has decreased since December 1997, with no search engine indexing more than approximately 16% (Lawrence & Giles, 1999). For a truly comprehensive index, all pages would have to be indexed simultaneously. Currently, this is not possible. (Lawrence & Giles, 1999).

Two approaches can be used when searching the Web. Subject guides (Yahoo, LookSmart) are commonly used for general topics, while search engines (Alta Vista, Northern Light) are better suited for finding specific information. A common complaint regarding search engines is the return of numerous pages containing irrelevant material. The results of a search are influenced by various factors, including database size, update frequency, search capability and design, and speed. Indexing new or modified pages by a search engine can take months. Lawrence and Giles (1999) found that search engines are more likely to list commercial sites than educational sites and sites that have more links. Therefore, the more "popular" sites are more apt to be listed in search results.

Another disadvantage of an Internet search is lack of quality control. Although there are over 100 peer-reviewed science, technical, and medical journals available online (Taubes, 1996) and many institutions review material before it is placed on a Web site, no formal review process exists for indexing a Web site on the Internet. Therefore, sites can be biased, misrepresent facts, or contain little factual information. Users must not only consider the relevance of the information to their current situation, location, and resources, but also the credibility of the Web site.

Development and Use of the Dairy Management Web Site

Information on the Internet pertaining to the dairy industry comes from a variety of sources, including but not limited to:

- Universities and colleges,
- Private industry,
- Magazines,
- Breed organizations, and
- The federal government.

Not all resources are linked, and deciding where and how to start searching can be a challenge. "The Dairy Manager" Web site was developed in an attempt to simplify finding and delivering reliable dairy management information to dairy producers and county Extension educators (Web site currently unavailable).

A panel of experts in various fields, including dairy nutrition, reproduction, veterinary medicine, agricultural engineering, and farm management review materials prior to placement on this site. "The Dairy Manager" consists of a compiled list of reviewed, specific, current dairy management reference Web sites. Each reference Web site is listed by title, description of contents, and keywords. Reference Web sites on "The Dairy Manager" are from private industry, government agencies, and public institutions. Most of the information on "The Dairy Manager" comes from university sources such as Extension bulletins, circulars, newsletters, and other publications. The rural market presents challenges in designing an effective Web site. Examples include reliability of telephone service and dated computer hardware and software (Samson, 1998). "The Dairy Manager" is designed to consider the limitations of the rural market. A simple Web-page layout and limited graphics allow for faster loading and access.

The initial "Welcome" page summarizes announcements or changes, allows users to choose the navigation method, and provides links that may be of importance to the dairy producer. Two methods of navigating "The Dairy Manager" are available. The "Search" feature searches lists of keywords in an internal database of reference Web sites for a match. The search engine searches reference Web sites listed within "The Dairy Manager," not the entire Web, with results displayed as a list of relevant Web sites containing the specified keyword(s).

The Directed Browsing feature consists of various topics. Users can look for information regarding "Livestock Management," "Forage Production and Management," "Labor and Business Management," or "Articles in Spanish." In order to narrow the choices, these categories are subdivided into additional topics such as "milking herd," "calves," "forage production," and "labor management." The livestock topics are subdivided into areas covering "nutrition," "health," "housing," and "management." Some sites may relate to numerous topics, therefore, a Web site may be listed under more than one topic and subtopic.

To access the information described in the reference Web site, a link "points" to the specific site. By clicking on the link, the reference Web site is opened onto a new window. "The Dairy Manager" is intended to provide current information and is updated frequently, with out-of-date information removed. "The Dairy Manager" currently contains 300-plus individual reference Web sites. Since its release in April 1999, the site has logged approximately 4,700 hits, averaging 400 hits per month. Counters on the Search page and Directed Browsing page indicate that the Search feature is used twice as much as the Browsing. Although "The Dairy Manager" presently contains information focused on management topics, future expansion is planned.

Conclusion

The "Dairy Manager" Web site is an attempt to simplify the process of finding dairy information for producers and county Extension educators. By incorporating two methods of navigating the site and linking to specific articles, users can use time more efficiently. Although face-to-face meetings, hands-on workshops, and demonstrations remain the mainstays of Extension, new technology and

electronic media can provide opportunities to university and county Extension educators for innovative and cost-effective ways of information distribution to producers (Latour & Meunier, 1999).

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