Polls, surveys and petitions online

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Many blogs and websites now include polls or surveys for user feedback, and an increasing number of activists and lobby groups are taking advantage of the web to collect signatures for online petitions, including through regular email campaigns. This article looks at the options for website designers who want to take advantage of online technology to collect information or elicit commitments from their users.

POLL, SURVEY OR PETITION?

In this article I have taken "poll" to mean a single multiple-choice question with a forced choice between two or more answers. Examples of these can be found on *The Sydney Morning Herald* website (http://www.smh.com.au), for instance, attached to related articles. A "survey" is a sequence of questions which often asks for more detailed responses via drop-down lists and text or comment boxes. A "petition" collects the user's information for inclusion on a list of supporters for a specific cause or action. I have not covered revenue-raising sites except where these overlap with the other types.

DO-IT-YOURSELF CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SOFTWARE

Most online website-creation software now has the capacity to insert polls. The popular content management systems Joomla! and Drupal both come with simple "poll modules" that can be inserted on any page or group of pages. These will present users with specified choices, collect their responses, and display these as a total both to the webmaster and (optionally) to the users. The Joomla! website describes the process of adding a poll to a page in Joomla! (http://www.docs.joomla.org/Adding_a_new_Poll), while a video tutorial on polls in Drupal can be found on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRPl6tqgpw4).

More elaborate poll modules and related systems are available as extensions from independent suppliers. The Joomla extensions website (http://www.extensions.joomla.org/extensions/contacts-and-feedback/polls), for instance, lists 16 poll extensions, and searches for "surveys" and "petitions" turn up 28 and six hits respectively. Both lists include freeware and commercial software. The Drupal extensions site (http://www.drupal.org/search/apachesolr_multisitesearch/polls?filters=ss_meta_type%3Amodule) is a little harder to search, but appears to include even more extensions. Other content management systems will have similar modules and extensions available. If you want to host a poll or survey on your own site, approach your webmaster for details.

HOSTED AND EMBEDDED POLLS AND SURVEYS

A Google search for "web polls" produces many hits. Most of these are for online providers who will host a poll or survey for you (eg http://www.99polls.com). Some of the more popular hosts are described below. Unless otherwise specified, all sites require users to set up an account providing their email address and a password in order to create polls or surveys.

Micropoll (http://www.micropoll.com) provides a quick and easy way of setting up simple multiple-choice polls. The user provides the question and the alternative answers, and the new poll is assigned to a new page on the Micropoll site. After users vote, they are shown a pie chart with the overall total number of votes for each alternative, a bar chart tracking trends over time, and a geographical chart of the United States showing votes from each State. The designer can choose from a range of colours and widths for the poll module, and a snippet of code is provided whereby the poll (and results) can be embedded in the user's own website. It's a very simple and effective system, though obviously geared towards American residents.

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Easypolls (http://www.easypolls.net) is a simple poll-only system in the style of Micropolls, but with an interesting payment option. Free polls appear with a link back to the Easypolls website, but users can choose to turn this off for a payment of US$4 per poll, with discounts for multiple polls. For an additional US$4, designers can see the location of their respondents, although like Micropoll, this appears to be restricted to the United States. Payments can be made through PayPal.

Booroo (http://www.booroo.com) offers both free and paid accounts. Setting up a poll takes a little longer, but it provides more options than Micropoll, including a closing date and provision to block users from skewing the poll by voting multiple times. Poll respondents see only a bar chart of results, but the designer can track responses by country of origin. Booroo also provides a "survey" option where designers can build questionnaires extending over several pages that can collect textual information and rankings. Many useful options are available, including "question logic" which can show or hide subsequent questions depending on the user's earlier responses. Survey design is carried out through a simple web interface which incorporates a drag-and-drop system.

Unlike poll respondents, survey respondents are not given feedback on the survey results. Designers who pay to subscribe can be notified of responses by email, and see individual submissions; designers using the free account see only collective statistics. In general, I found Booroo easy to use and powerful, and my only complaint is the annoying eight-character minimum for the length of the password required.

PollDaddy (http://www.polldaddy.com) offers a similar range of options to Booroo – polls, surveys and quizzes – but with the additional option of "ratings". PollDaddy polls and ratings must be embedded in the user's own website, but their surveys and quizzes can be accessed on the PollDaddy website by a URL. Its polls fall between Micropoll and Booroo in terms of the options available, but PollDaddy survey options include useful items like file uploads, and embedded media such as images and sound files. Like Booroo, PollDaddy offers commercial accounts with access to individual responses and other features. Prices start at US$200 per annum. Booroo's Elite package is roughly the same price, but it also offers an academic account at US$99 per annum.

PollDaddy "quizzes" are made up of a sequence of poll questions with right and wrong answers. The user's responses are tracked, and they can be given a "pass" or "fail" at the completion of the quiz based on the number of questions they got right. "Ratings" are five-star or thumbs-up/thumbs-down evaluations of single items (eg movies or books). A wide range of options is available in terms of colour, font size and layout.

SurveyMonkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/MyAccount_GetStarted.aspx) is a long-established site that specialises in surveys. Free accounts are available and users are given access to predefined survey templates and pre-written questions with which to gather information. The design process is text-based and a little more cumbersome than on some of the newer sites, but the process is relatively simple and the questionnaire can be edited at any stage. Once designed, the surveys are accessible through links to the SurveyMonkey site, though they can also be embedded in your own webpages and sent via email. "Basic" (ie free) accounts only allow for a limited number of questions. Plans with unlimited questions and additional features range from A$19 to A$65 per month.

PETITION SITES

Online petitions need more management than polls or surveys if they are to retain credibility. Mechanisms are required to check that responses are authentic and to prevent one person inflating the figures with multiple responses. This is one reason why petitions cluster on a few specific sites. Another is that petition sites hope to attract users who, having signed one petition, will go on to sign others as well. So, although some petition extensions are available for do-it-yourself web designers through content management systems like Drupal and Joomla!, the majority are centrally hosted on specialised sites.

iPetitions (http://www.ipetitions.com) is a free global petition hosting system open to everyone. It claims to have gathered 17 million signatures so far. Once registered on the site, users can create a new petition by providing a name, title and some text. Optional extras include fields to gather such information as country, date of birth and religious affiliation, an optional category for the petition, and

various levels of checking for duplicate signatories. The petition designer can also add comments in the form of blog entries. The petition then appears on its own webpage within the iPetitions site.

Persons wanting to "sign" a petition must provide a name and a valid email address. They can then view the list of signatories and send a link to the petition to their friends via email. Visitors to the site can browse for petitions by category or through a search box on the front page. The front page also lists the most recent and most popular petitions: at the time of writing, the most popular had over 18,000 signatures. The petition designer can view a list of signatures at any time and download it in Excel (CSV) or PDF.

PetitionBuzz (http://www.petitionbuzz.com) is a simple site where users can register or log on and set up a petition in a matter of minutes. The petition can include fields for the signatory's email address and location, and PayPal options are available to solicit donations from signatories. PetitionBuzz is linked to Facebook and other media sites, allowing for cross-promotions.

The Care2 petition site (http://www.thepetitionsite.com) is currently claiming over 71 million signatures, and has several petitions running with signatures in the tens of thousands. Users, including designers, can log in via their Facebook accounts. Care2 requires more detail when setting up a petition than iPetitions does: designers must supply their address and specify a subcategory for the petition as well as the main category. They can specify a target (ie the person or organisation to be presented with the petition) add a starting and closing date to the petition, and nominate the desired number of responses. Signatories can be restricted to people from a specific American State or a specific country. Petitions can be given their own custom URL. Once a petition is signed the designer can view not only the total number of signatures but the rate per day.

Care2 is an object lesson in clever marketing. Sign a Care2 petition and it will pop up with others that it thinks you might also be interested in. Users are encouraged to sign up for a free email account on the site, and given "butterfly points" to redeem for worthy causes: though with 500 points required to buy a single pencil, it's going to take a lot of commitment to do any real good. With e-cards, a meet-up community and its own news channels, the Care2 site seems to be aiming to provide a one-stop-shop for activists from Generation Y, though the fact that its interests include astrology and "spirituality" should ring some alarm bells.

GoPetition (http://www.gopetition.com.au) is a specifically Australian petition site. It's a good deal less glossy than iPetitions or Care2, and lacks the visual appeal of these sites, but the same functionality appears to be present. The front page shows some featured petitions, and the most popular of these at the time of writing had between 10 and 20,000 signatures. GoPetition also collects financial sponsorships for its petitions.

CONCLUSION

The winners for style and ease of use are Booroo in the polls and surveys section and Care2 for petitions, but all the others have something unique to offer, and new sites are appearing all the time. It's worth shopping around before you commit yourself to a particular site, and watch out for "phishing" sites whose main aim is to gather email addresses for resale to junk mailers. Try and ensure that there is more to the site than just a plausible front page.