

Jonathan's JA-SIG Weblog

Observations and musings from Jonathan Markow

Sizzle and Spark

November 19, 2007

One of the high points of the unconference was a home-grown student portal demo by Collier Jones of UMBC. It isn't a uPortal implementation, but it certainly grabbed our attention. Collier gave us a taste of what he has almost single-handedly accomplished in a lightning talk, one of a series of ten minute mini-sessions with which we began each day of the unconference. The crowd wanted more, and we made sure that a full session was scheduled later in the day.

The myUMBC portal experience is highly interactive and borrows the kind of Web 2.0 techniques that make sites like digg, Google, and del.icio.us so intuitive and easy to use. For example, content on the site that is most highly rated by users appears on the portal home page, in popularity order. (Less popular content is also displayed in random sequence to give it a chance for exposure.) Most portal content may be starred by the user, which causes it to appear in a Favorites box on his/her home page for easy access. A dashboard lets you know when new alerts, emails, and posts are available. A role button lets people with multiple campus roles (e.g., student, staff) choose the content that they want to work with at any time.

The portal is colorful, it's fun, and it presents users with frequent, delightful surprises: a hilarious image here, a strange sound effect there. A "Page Not Found" message is presented with an astonished squirrel animation. None of this feels intrusive. Rather, in the context of an application that offers so many rich and useful experiences, it gives the user yet another reason to want to come back.

How did Collier do it? First, he went out and talked at length to as many people as he could—students, staff, and faculty—and he asked them what they would like to see in their portal. Then he started giving it to them. He combined that aim to please with a sense of humor, a strong creative streak, some wicked coding chops, and many long days of preparation.

Fun and enthusiasm are infectious. Put them together with a laser-sharp focus on pleasing one's customers and magic is made possible.