

Designing Websites Effectively:

**Promising Practices for
Providing Legal Information to the Public**

**Report for the
Charities Directorate
Canada Revenue Agency**

Disclaimer

This report was compiled for the specific purpose of providing the Charities Directorate with information concerning the current practices in the use of the web for the education of the public. It is not intended to reflect broad usability standards.

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201-10350 124 Street

Edmonton AB T5N 3V9

www.legalresourcecentre.ca

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Introduction

The purposes of this document are

- to review the related literature and research regarding proper website design as it can be applied to the education of the public,
- to identify and summarize promising practices, and
- to identify some examples of websites exhibiting good practices.

The document will serve as a context for the specific assessment of the *Giving to Charity: Information for Donors* section of the Charities Directorate. The context relates to the current promising practices utilized by informal and non-formal education of the public

The Role of Public Legal Education

While conceding that there is no consensus on the mission of public legal education (PLE), Gander (2003) describes the goal of public legal education as assisting the public “to understand that the justice system is a public institution – that they are not just the beneficiaries of the system but the stewards of it”. She identifies the Internet as one of the most significant forces of change in the approach to PLE by its ability to remove barriers between the public and the law.

Public legal education (PLE) began to take shape in Canada in the late 1960s and early 70s as various agencies responded to the legal information needs of newly awakened activists – hippies, hitchhikers, American draft dodgers, consumers, women, Aboriginal people, environmentalists, human rights advocates, and others who saw that the law was affecting their lives in a direct way. While many of the first efforts in meeting these needs were short term and *ad hoc*, by the mid-70s, several provinces sported organizations that existed for the sole purpose of providing PLE. Today, PLE has become an integral part of the Canadian legal landscape. It is a nation-wide enterprise that enables Canadians to learn more about virtually any aspect of the law through a variety of formats and at varying levels of sophistication. PLE makes access to legal knowledge a realistic expectation for thousands of Canadians.

Over the years the various PLE organizations have engaged a multidisciplinary team of professionals and stakeholders in a range of activities including

- providing innovative in person, telephone, and internet-based library, reference, information, and referral services;
- developing innovative learning resources (e.g., workbooks, mock trial kits, participatory drama modules, dramatic presentations, aids to using story-telling and literature to teach the law, games, radio and TV productions, interactive web-based services, and a national law and justice portal);

- engaging in community development and capacity building activities (e.g., organizing social service agencies with respect to child welfare, youth justice, and residential tenancies law reform; better equipping boards of not-for-profit agencies to deal with their legal and ethical duties and with the legal aspects of the issues presented to them by their clientele; and developing the capacities of specific publics to use the Internet to engage in policy-development and law reform activities), and
- promoting greater public engagement in the law through the development of self-help resources, guides to court and other procedures and resources for victims, by supporting the development of community-based legal services; by serving on a variety of government justice, consumer, and curriculum advisory committees, and by participating in major events such as Law Day sponsored by the Canadian Bar Association.

PLE providers have worked with a wide variety of publics including children, teachers, librarians, health care practitioners, young offenders; immigrants; seniors, inmates of correctional facilities, people with a variety of physical and mental disabilities, victims of violence, self-representing litigants, and members of low income, inner city, rural, and Aboriginal communities. They have worked on issues ranging from environmental law, charities law, impaired driving, child welfare, youth justice, and family violence to housing, identity theft, trafficking women, medical/legal issues, constitutional reform, and treaty rights. They have delivered programs in court houses, schools, correctional facilities, churches, libraries, community centres, and summer camps in urban, rural and remote regions of our province as well as online. Success in meeting this diverse range of needs is largely attributable to use of intermediaries such as schools, libraries, government agencies, legal professionals, and community-based organizations to deliver services.

PLE providers are not only involved in developing the practice in the field, they have been instrumental in articulating the theoretical dimensions of that practice. To that end they have undertaken research and scholarly work with respect to various educational theories about learning and learners, information seeking behaviours of various sectors of the public, and the implications of legal theories for the practice of public legal education.

In the course of engaging in this range of activities, PLE providers have gained a host of insights into the reasons the public and various sectors of it, seek out information, their preferences in accessing information, knowledge, skills and confidence, and how to meet a diverse range of needs.

More information about these activities can be found on a website devoted to the Theory and Practice of PLE: www.plecanada.org.

Informal Learning on the Web

The Internet has become a major factor in the lives of most Canadians. Statistics Canada (2006) reports that 68% of Canadians over 18 used the Internet for personal reasons. This use varies with factors such as income and age. Of Canadians between the ages of 18-34, over 88% use the Internet, while only 23.8% of those aged 65 and over do. There is an equally apparent difference shown by education, with 31.2% of those with less than a high school education being 'online' compared to 89.4% of those with a university degree. People in rural areas also are less likely to use the Internet, with at least a 10% usage drop from most urban areas.

The World Wide Web has also become a major tool in the education of the adult public. Organizations are using the Internet to reach individuals in the places where they are, without requiring attendance in a specific learning site. Learners control when, where, and what they learn. Information seekers can become learners. The type of learning that occurs in this case has been called, varying, informal, non-formal, self-directed, and incidental learning. Although the literature sometimes distinguishes one from another, all three terms mean generally that the learning "takes place outside a dedicated learning environment". (Smith & Cook, p. 36) For the purposes of this paper, the term informal learning will be used. It refers to learning that occurs because of some activity or event in the life of the individual. The individual may not even recognize the process as one of learning.

In the early rush to 'teach' the public what they needed to know "it is presumed by educators, politicians and technologists that ITs such as computers and the Internet are inherently educational, capable through their very use of stimulating learning and auto-didacticism throughout the adult population." (Selwyn, p. 142) Thus site designs paid little attention to how adults learn and more specifically how they learn on the web. Websites were designed and organized in the way that the creators thought was logical but which possibly made no intuitive sense for the learner. In 2002, Gander indicated that the Internet has facilitated a

...shift toward learner-control over knowledge acquisition. Although still in its infancy, the Web already provides more people with greater access to more information than any education system could hope to facilitate. Learners have much greater ability to decide what they want to learn, when and how they want to learn it, who they want to learn it from, and with whom they want to share their learning experience...Everything from the learning objectives, to the content, means, processes, duration, evaluation and application can be determined by the individual or group that engages in the learning. While this learning can take place within formal programs of study, it need

not. In fact, the Internet has facilitated a tremendous surge in informal learning – any activity in the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions. This kind of informal learning never ends. (p. 23)

Many effective websites designed for informal learning now organize their sites through a life event approach. This approach attempts to mirror how the users of that site will experience the related events in their lives. *Laws for Landlords and Tenants in Alberta* is an example of such a site. It presents the law in a life event pattern which follows the process of the renter, i.e., becoming a tenant, moving in, living there, and moving out.

Good educational websites are also built upon adult learning theory and pedagogical approaches.

Adults approach learning with their own reservoir of skills and experiences and use this history to engage with the information, make new inferences, and establish new levels of understanding. Drawing from this reservoir also demands energy and reflection in order for the learning to assist with changes in self-concept.... Adults want information that is ostensibly applicable to their lives and from which they will be able to enhance their current lifestyle. They tend to require the information quickly and completely in order to continue with their lives. (Sy & Anderson, p. 23)

A useful approach is to use constructivist theory as a basis of site design which allows adults to approach the site at many different points depending upon where they are in their learning process.

Promising Practices: What are they?

The use of the term “promising practices” has emerged strongly in the last 5 years, replacing the term “best practices” which grew out of the initiatives at World Class Manufacturing. (Leseure et al., p. 169; Meyers, Smith & Martin, p. 3) Best practices, in this case, implied that a universal specific set of practices would lead to a successful and consistent result, no matter where applied. “Promising practices” on the other hand, implies that there is a group of practices that have been useful in certain situations and are likely to have desirable results for other organizations implementing them. “They are ‘promising’ only rather than ‘best’ because they may need customization now and in the future.” (Leseure et al., p. 170)

A general review of research literature reveals a wealth of reports and articles about promising practices. Most of these are practice-oriented reports within specific fields. They cover diverse fields, including health, education, social services, and management.

Our research uncovered few examples of research focused on promising practices in the use of the web for informal public education and fewer yet on the use of the web in public legal education. The closest document of those identified is *Applications of the Internet in Public Legal Education*. (Gander, 2002) This article outlines some of the current and potential applications of the Internet specifically in public legal education at that time.

For the purposes of this study, promising practices are the compilation of the most current technical and content practices utilized on websites designed to inform and educate the public in an informal way. They are examples, not rules. They are guidelines, not recipes.

Methodology

The project team began by reviewing the current literature on good website design and construction especially as it can be applied to adult education. This literature was summarized and compiled into a series of general practices. Those summarized practices were then used to identify potential websites for further examination.

Six websites were purposefully chosen to serve as exemplars of one or more of the promising practices. The timelines within which this research needed to be completed precluded a comprehensive review of all potential websites.

Summary of Promising Practices

Eight general practices emerged from the analysis of the literature and of how organizations are currently and successfully using the Internet for public education about legal issues. They are summarized here. Appendix A provides greater detail about each practice.

Promising Practice #1 – Site Profile and Findability

A new website must be easily located by web users who do not know it exists. This means that close attention must be paid to

- metadata conventions;

- promotion to major search engines; and
- specific marketing strategies.

Metadata

Choosing the right metadata terms is vital to findability. The ranking of the website in search results is partially based on where the words on the web page appear. “The page's HTML title tag is most important. Failure to put target keywords in the title tag is the main reason why perfectly relevant web pages may be poorly ranked.” (Sullivan, 2002) According to Nielsen’s Home page Guidelines (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/2002/0512.html>), websites should have a window title that offers good visibility to those search engines crawling your site. This makes it necessary to consider what search terms would be used by people looking for specific legal information. Choosing appropriate metadata terms is particularly challenging in developing legal information sites. Legal terminology is not well-known to many sectors of the public, but there is no consistency in the use of alternative terms. Focus group testing of terms can be helpful but may not generate terms that are universally relevant. There are also methods of finding out the popularity of search terms, from paid services to Google Trends (<http://www.google.com/trends>) which can track term usage by region as well as creating a temporal record of how many people have been searching for a term. In general, older, more well-known words are used more often than newer ones. (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/search-keywords.html>)

Linking and Partnering

Multiple pathways to the site can be created through external linking and partnering with other organizations. The number of links to a site is part of the ranking system for many search engines

Linking from outside sources and appearing high on the list of results from search engines are essential to an accessible profile. According to Jakob Nielsen, “web users are growing ever-more search dominant. Search is how people discover new websites and find individual pages within websites and intranets. Unless you're listed on the first search engine results page, you might as well not exist.” (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/search-keywords.html>) This is a key reason why the search engine Google is one of the five most popular sites on the Internet (<http://www.google.ca/intl/en/corporate/facts.html>) and why there were over six billion searches performed on various search engines last November. (Nielsen//Netratings, 2006)

Creating relationships between organizations and sites involves identifying the key people with whom you wish to partner, and building a good rapport with those partners. Cross-marketing allows organizations to go beyond reciprocal linking and exchange more substantial recognition of others sites and resources is

another way to increase profile. Co-branding can allow visitors to use the services on another site without leaving the host site. These opportunities need to be explored and exploited. (Gander, 2001)

“In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves ‘important’ weigh more heavily and help to make other pages ‘important’.” (<http://www.google.com/technology/index.html>)

Linking of public legal education sites to other legal sites may be a useful strategy for enhancing awareness of the site. Linking to sites of non-legal agencies involved in the same interest community may also be appropriate. Legal and government sites are often particularly cautious about taking advantages of these opportunities for cross-marketing because they may imply a type of endorsement of the other websites or preferential treatment of some over others. Some government and legal institutions often impose very significant restrictions on the design of a site which may prevent it from meeting particular needs. These restrictions can sometimes be overcome through partnership arrangements that remove the site from the coverage of those restrictions.

Promising Practice #2 – Home Page

The home page is the most important page on most websites and gets more page views than any other page. (Nielsen, 2000, p. 166) It’s crucial therefore that the site’s purpose is clear right from the home page. Depending on the search, many users won’t enter a website from the home page but one of the first things a user will do after arriving to a new site is to visit that site’s home page. Nielsen identifies three fundamental features of a home page: a directory (navigation) of the site’s main content; a summary of the site’s purpose; and a search feature.

According to Krug, the tagline and the welcome blurb on the home page of a website is also where the user expects to find explicit statements of what the site is about. (p. 103) The home page needs to provide users with an obvious starting point for the main tasks that they user will undertake on the site.

Good visual design is essential to encourage people to stay on the site and to probe deeper into the site. Visitors will judge the credibility of the site with a very quick scan of the home page.

Designing the home page is often a very challenging aspect of designing a legal educational website. Law is generally an intimidating topic for people outside the justice community – in the past the system itself has discouraged the public from

entering its domain. Overcoming the visitor's apprehension about intruding into a space that they assume must be meant for professionals, without being condescending can be tricky. This is not helped by the dearth of visual representations of the legal system. Those that exist tend to reinforce the solemnity of the law and the severity of its consequences. Many sites use images of the publics they hope to reach through the website, helping to communicate the site's expectations regarding its visitors. Quickly conveying the purpose of the site in plain language can also be difficult if the content of the site is technical or abstract. Story-telling, process charts, Venn diagrams, and the like can help to orient the visitor to the content to be found in subsequent sections of the site.

Promising Practice #3 – Content

Once visitors have found their way to your site the content needs to be usable, and each section of the website must contain value for the user. The most important role of a website is to convey information to a user in a way that they will understand. This means that the legal content not only should be made accessible through plain language but should also be written in a personal manner and in a conversational tone.

It is also important to consider that reading online is a different process from reading on paper. "People rarely read web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word." (Nielsen, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>) When the site involves educating the public, scannability is even more important. If using your information is not easy, people will move on to another site. However excellent the information is, it means nothing if no one reads it through. This means having content that is structurally and textually usable.

It is sometimes helpful to break the task of developing legal content into several parts and stages. It may be appropriate to begin by producing a legal research document to ensure that the information to be conveyed is accurate and complete. A considerable amount of time must be spent on developing the content architecture to make explicit to the designer what the relationships are between information, stages in the legal process, outcomes, etc. The results of these exercises then become the background to decisions about how to present the information effectively.

Text

Information is of no use if it isn't written in understandable language and this is even truer with legal information. This means that the information presented to

the user should be in plain language that is certain in meaning and yet still easy to understand. The vocabulary used should be conversational and uncomplicated. (LaCroix) It may be helpful to bear in mind that people generally read at a lower level when they are dealing with subject matter that is new to them rather than material on a topic they are more familiar with.

One of the most important rules for writing for a website is that most people won't actually read what you write. The first sentence in any block of text must contain the most important information. Because of the scanning vs. reading figures used above, text written for the Internet should use about half the words that a printed document would use. (Nielsen, p. 101) When the users scan the text blocks of a format that has large paragraphs, they miss much of the information. Eye tracking studies have found that many people view web pages in an F shape, reading the headlines, down the left side of the page and then the first sentence of the first few paragraphs. (http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html) This means that the most important information on the page should always be in the top paragraphs. There should only be one topic per paragraph, any later topics might be missed.

Organizing information into other formats is also an important aspect of this promising practice. Bulleted lists, short paragraphs, sub headings and FAQs are easier to scan and to navigate. They accentuate the important information that needs to be conveyed.

Another consideration of the textual content is how to write for low-literacy users. Since such a large portion of the Canadian population seek legal information, all levels of literacy must be covered. "The most notable difference between lower- and higher-literacy users is that lower-literacy users can't understand a text by glancing at it. They must read word for word and often spend considerable time trying to understand multi-syllabic words." (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html>) This does not lower the case for scannability, it actually reinforces it. Writing large blocks of information, using unfamiliar words and having to scroll through a page are just some of the activities that lower the comprehension and ease of low literacy readers. These activities can be dealt with when planning for users who will scan the text.

Structure

Nielsen (2000) indicates that poor information architecture always results in poor usability. Structure, or information architecture, refers to the physical format in which the text and visuals are presented. The structural design should increase the ease of scanning the text. Because of the scanning nature of website users, well-designed headings help to facilitate both the scanning and the eventual reading of the information. Information needs to be 'chunked'. Some of the

important structural features to consider are clear headings, lists rather than blocks of text, and clear descriptions of where a link goes. (LaCroix) Headings and links are road signs to information. The clearer and more precise the sign, the more people will find their way to the information. Adopting a structure that reflects the stages in which a visitor will likely need the information may assist in making the content readable because the context will support the meaning of the text. It will also contribute to convincing the visitor that the site will provide the information being sought. All these aids are particularly critical in helping the public learn something as alien to them as legal information can sometimes be.

Promising Practice #4 – Navigation

“Clear, well-thought-out navigation is one of the best opportunities a site has to create a good impression.” (Krug, 60) Keeping this in mind, it is important to offer multiple access points for users to get the legal information they need. The information architecture of a site needs to be clear and easy to understand, and should be structured to mirror the user’s tasks and their views of the information space. (Nielsen, 2000) Nielsen states that there are three questions that the navigation should answer: Where am I? Where have I been? and Where can I go? (p. 88) Consistent navigation is essential to keep users on the site.

Navigation – *Where am I?*

There is not one specific way the users will enter a website. Each page is a potential entry point from which people need to navigate. They need to know where they are in terms of the structure, and the structure should be determined by the tasks the users want to perform on the site. They also need to know what organization’s site they are looking at, both at a larger and smaller level. A clear and consistent format is the best way to convey this information.

Navigation – *Where have I been?*

It is important for people using a site to be able to find their way back to something they’ve seen before, and navigation menus are meant to help users locate and link to destination pages. By going back to the beginning, looking at some information they now need, or going back to a main trail after taking a side path, users need to be able to see where they were. Organizations need to be careful with the use of internal links taking the user to another part of the website or to a completely different and external link. Is it clear to the user where they are now and where they’ve been? If not, consider the use of some internal links opening up into a new window. Breadcrumb trails, a back button and clear local navigation are features that can increase usability in this area. Websites should also include site maps to provide effective feedback on the user’s location within the site.

Navigation – *Where can I go?*

This is a question that needs to be asked frequently on most sites: now what? Users need to be able to use the navigation on the site to quickly find the best information to suit their needs. This means creating a navigation system that is easy to understand and clearly states what information is in each section. Having sections that are too similar can cause extra confusion (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/ia.html>) and leads to the user feeling frustrated. Having too wide a focus within one area can lead to missing the relevant information. This aspect of navigation is important to test with users, as what can seem simple to someone familiar with the site and information can be baffling for a new user.

Poor navigational assistance is a particularly pervasive problem with legal information websites at the moment. They are being built in stages as resources permit, but resources do not always flow logically from the point of view of web development. As a result, sites are often incomplete and visitors may get very frustrated moving from one part to the next in search of information that may not be anywhere. Not being able to navigate easily and keep track of the journey may so frustrate users that they leave the site before they find the information they need even if it is on the site. There is also a plethora of legal information websites but no apparent logic as to which site will have what information on it. Visitors may be provided with links to the other websites but not told they are leaving or how to get back.

Promising Practice #5 – Site Search

Search is how most people work online. A clear navigational system can sometimes usurp its ubiquity, but not often. The heavy use of the major search engines also means that most people have a clear idea of what a search should look like and how it should perform.

Search is such a prominent part of the Web user experience that users have developed a firm mental model for how it's supposed to work. Users expect search to have three components:

- A **box** where they can type words
- A **button** labelled “search” that they click to run the search
- A **list** of top results that's linear, prioritized, and appears on a new page – the *search engine results page* (SERP)

(<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050509.html>)

People expect the search to look a certain way and they expect it to act a certain way. Going against these expectations simply creates confusion. “Given the potential power of searching and the number of people who prefer searching to

browsing...every page should have either a search box or a link to a search page.” (Krug, 67)

The SERP should also follow the usability practices of other pages: most relevant information at the top, with simplicity being an important factor. Once again, it should look the way the user expects it to, mimicking the SERPs of major search engines.

Another factor that needs to be taken into account is spelling. Both low literacy users and seniors are prone to misspelling, mistyping, or adding plurals and hyphens. This is such an important factor that Nielsen includes it as one of his top ten worst design mistakes. (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9605.html>)

Some legal information sites make good use of drop-down menus that suggest appropriate search terms or categories. This can be helpful for people who are not familiar with legal jargon and don't know where to start. Reference to taxonomies and folksonomies, process charts, and the like elsewhere on the site can be helpful in orienting the visitor to the legal landscape.

Promising Practice #6 – Accessibility

“Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can use the Web. More specifically, Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web, and that they can contribute to the Web. Web accessibility also benefits others, including older people with changing abilities due to aging.”

(<http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/accessibility.php>)

Many organizations have specific objectives and standards with respect to web accessibility. Many rely to some degree on the accessibility guidelines developed by the World Wide Web Consortium. W3C also provides templates for the evaluation of accessibility through their Web Accessibility Initiative.

(<http://www.w3.org/WAI/eval/template.html>)

Given that legal information websites are already intimidating and difficult to navigate, and the particular importance to disabled people of accessing information on websites, attention to accessibility issues is especially important in designing legal information websites.

Promising Practice #7 – Educational Design

If a site is to be developed as an educational tool, the educational theory underpinning the site needs to be clearly understood by all involved in the construction.

The World Wide Web Consortium published Learning Design standards in 2003. The term “educational design” as used here is not meant to refer to those standards, but to the process of designing user-centred pages that relate to how the learner approaches the topic and what the learning objectives of the site are.

The law must be presented on websites in a sequence that makes sense legally and educationally. The site should enable visitors to locate themselves in both the structure of the law – how their problem is viewed in law and what law applies - and the process of resolving a legal matter.

Promising Practice #8 – Evaluation

Developing indicators of success is important in the evaluation of websites that are geared towards public legal education. It is crucial that organizations establish parameters around what they hope to accomplish. Organizations should then periodically review their progress in terms of those indicators.

Knowing what you want to accomplish and setting goals might include evaluating statistics like how many site visits to the website in a month, or a year. Monitoring any volume increases due to promotional campaigns would also be a good way to evaluate a website’s success. Other tools like feedback forms or online polls and surveys would also aid in evaluating success.

Evaluating legal websites can also include more directed ways of generating feedback. Focus groups may help get qualitative feedback that helps with identifying ways in which design or content can be improved. Working one-on-one with a few users can quickly reveal their preferences in accessing and using a site. Asking a sample of representatives of the site’s intended audience to use the site to find appropriate information for a specific set of queries can also disclose problems that would not be revealed through less intense engagement with learners.

Limitations of this Study

The breadth and depth of this review were significantly limited by the time limits for completion. As an exploratory review, only a few key websites were reviewed and therefore reviewing a larger sample may have yielded additional practices and more detail. These limitations would need to be addressed in further research.

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APPENDIX A.

Designing Websites Effectively: A Promising Practices Checklist

Promising Practice #1 – Profile and Findability	
Site design should address the questions of Who? Why? and How? Who do the designers want to have come to the site? Why would they come? How would they find the site? The more pathways there are to a site, the more people will find it.	
Key Success Factors <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Linking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Has a high number of credible outside sources linked into the site▪ Is linked from websites that are content related or which attract the same target audience▪ Increases search engine ranking through linking
Key Success Factors <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Metadata	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ HTML title tag includes words familiar to users▪ Descriptors reflect the search terms used by the public when looking for the information (i.e., charities, donations, etc.)▪ Site has been promoted to major search engines

Promising Practice #2 – Home Page	
The home page gets more page views than any other page on a site. The home (main) page is the 'flagship' for the site and should answer two questions quickly: "Where am I?" and "What does this site do?" (Nielsen, 2000)	
Key Success Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Has a clear indication of who the site is trying to reach▪ Has a strong visual design▪ Has a title that make sense to the user and leaves no room for confusion▪ Provides a clear sense of the purpose of the site▪ Provides a clear idea of the site's main content▪ Has a search feature specific to the site▪ Has strong, meaningful visuals and icons that are welcoming and approachable▪ Follows a life event approach to the information▪ Establishes a strong identity that follows throughout the site

Promising Practice #3 – Content

Users come to a site for information. They do not come consciously to learn. Each section of the website should contain value. Users will want to know by scanning the home page that they can find the information they need on the site.

Key Success Factors

- Text

- Puts the main idea in the first sentence of a paragraph
- Written in plain language with vocabulary that is conversational and uncomplicated
- Defines difficult terms that cannot be simplified
- Accounts for the fact that users will scan the content, not read it
- Ensures accurate and up-to-date information
- Visuals and text are related
- Uses a variety of approaches to presentation (story-telling, charts, diagrams)

Key Success Factors

- Structure

- Reinforces the sense of identity of the site
- Organizes the information in a way that is intuitive to the user, not the creator
- Uses the 'prime real estate' for key information
- Provides 'layers' of information starting with the most vital but offering more information for those who want it
- Increases the ease of scanning the text by using clear headings, lists instead of blocks of text, and clearly describing where a link goes
- Considers the information seeking behaviours of adult learners
- Organizes the information in a variety of formats (bulleted lists, short paragraphs, sub headings and FAQs)
- Uses highlighting and emphasis on key words
- Links are preceded by a description of the information to be found
- Uses chunking effectively
- Has print-friendly pages
- Makes effective use of ITs (video-streaming, blogging, interactivity)
- Provides summary pages of key information in printable format
- Indicates 'last updated' information on all pages

Promising Practice #4 – Navigation

Information architecture needs to be clear and easy to understand, offering multiple access points to the information. The navigation should be consistent from page to page. The navigation should allow for the learner to approach the information through various channels. Users are no longer tolerant of sites that don't work efficiently.

Key Success Factors

- Where am I?

- Each page is a potential entry point from which the user needs to be able to navigate the full site
- A clear and consistent format tells the user where they are, what they are looking at, and to whose organization the website belongs
- Uses 'signposts' to locate the user (taxonomies, folksonomies, charts, trees)

Key Success Factors

- Where have I been?

- Features such as a breadcrumb trail, a back button, and a clear local navigational menu can increase usability in this area
- Consistent use of these features is necessary
- Always make sure the user can return to the home page of the site
- Site map should be available from every page to provide effective feedback on the user's location within the site
- Links to the outside should open in a new browser

Key Success Factors

- Where can I go?

- Navigation should be structured to mirror the user's tasks and their views of the information space
- Links have scroll over alternate titles to describe their content
- Makes judicious use of trees and sub-menus

Promising Practice #5 – Search

Studies of users indicate that over half of them are search-dominant. They will go directly to the search and will not read the content of the page. Users also expect a search to work in a certain way and to give certain kinds of results.

Key Success Factors

- The Search has three components: a box to type words; a button labelled "Search" or "Go"; and a list of returned results
- Search takes misspellings into account
- The search clearly states whether it searches more than the specific section/page of a site; options should be available
- Search indicates how responses are ranked

Promising Practice #6 – Accessibility

“Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can use the Web. More specifically, Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web, and that they can contribute to the Web. Web accessibility also benefits others, including older people with changing abilities due to aging.” (W3C/WAI)

Key Success Factors

- Meets a reasonable number of the W3C guidelines
- Uses contrasting colours
- Alternatives to font size and style are provided
- Text is divided into logical groups
- Style sheets are used
- Text and images are provided
- Accessibility information should be clearly available on every page
- Uses inclusive language

Promising Practice #7 – Educational Design

Site design should reflect the learning concepts underlying the design (e.g., constructivism, instructivism, formal, informal). It should accommodate different learning styles and information seeking behaviours. Sites designed to educate need to provide ways for the learner to interact with the information.

Key Success Factors

- Identifies who the site is designed to educate
- Builds the key information around the key learning concepts
- Enables learners to apply the information to their own life experiences
- Enables users to contact someone or to be further directed to another source when they don't learn what they need
- Uses 'push technology' to update and educate

Promising Practice #8 – Evaluation

Success factors and usability standards for the site should be developed in advance of site construction. Evaluation should take place before, during and after the site is created.

Key Success Factors

- Goals and objectives of the site are established prior to design
- Statistics are used to help evaluate usage trends
- Feedback is sought from site users throughout the construction process and after launch
- A variety of tools are used in evaluating success (feedback forms, online polls, focus groups, observations, and surveys)

APPENDIX B.

Annotated Bibliography of Selected Literature and Research

Campbell, K. (2004). *E-effective Writing for E-Learning Environments*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

The importance of planning websites from both an educational perspective and a web design perspective is explored through planning the site to content and testing the final product. Through it all, the importance of centering your design on the user is emphasized, especially by considering learning types and objectives.

Doherty, D. (2002). Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research. *Making Family Violence Law Information Available to People in Rural Areas: An Inventory of Promising Practices*. Retrieved March 16, 2007 from http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/reports/fv_rural.html.

A report for the Department of Justice from the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research on promising practices and strategies for public legal education in rural areas. Because of the low population density, rural audiences are often difficult to reach with public legal education and other resources. The study emphasizes the importance of networking with local groups, and the need to look at the specific barriers within the community (lack of transportation, low literacy levels and poverty) and the rural context.

Gander, L. (2002). *Applications of the Internet for Public Legal Education*. Retrieved March 16, 2007 from <http://www.acjnet.org/docs/int-ple.doc>.

This paper outlines some of the current and potential applications of the Internet specifically in public legal education (PLE) at the time. Potential uses for the Internet described in the article include resource listings, promotion of existing services and events, relationship building and maintenance, fund development and e-commerce, information sharing, and volunteer recruiting. Listing many of the PLE organizations using the Internet at the time, Gander shows the importance of fully realizing the potential of the Internet for PLE.

Gander, L. (2003). The Changing Face of Public Legal Education in Canada. *Canadian Forum on Civil Justice*, Summer, 4-9.

Public legal education is undergoing a change in both its relationships with its funders and with the public. Gander points out that the Internet is one of the major changes in providing PLE and has both good and bad points. It is necessary to understand what effect the limits computer competency, literacy and language dependence have on providing information online and what can be done to minimize it.

Imel, S. (2003). Informal Adult Learning and the Internet. *Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education*, 50, 3-4.

This short paper is about the importance of the Internet in facilitating informal learning practices. It looks at research in its effectiveness in work environments as well as in different segments of the population. There is also a question of the alienation that can be caused by access issues and that, even with access, not all people choose to use the Internet for learning.

Krug, S. (2000). *Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders Publishing.

Krug's book on web usability centres on the importance of lower the cognitive load of the users. People using a site should not need to think more than necessary. This concept is most important when looking at titles, link labelling, information architecture and home pages. Krug describes site design in terms of answering the questions users will have as quickly and easily as possible.

LaCroix, P. (2006). *User-Centric Writing: It's Not About You*. Retrieved March 15, 2007 from <http://www.charityvillage.com/cv/research/rmed52.html>.

Charity Village is a site dedicated to providing information to help Canadian charities. LaCroix's column covers the web design issues that can arise. From keeping content clear and simple to navigation systems she provides advice about to keep focused on the website user.

Lin, A. and Gregor, S. (2006). Designing Websites for Learning and Enjoyment: A Study of Museum Experiences. *International Review of Research and Open and Distance Learning*, 7 (3). Retrieved March 19, 2007 from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/364/739>.

When people are learning informally, they could have many potential reasons. Lin and Gregor focus on those who choose to learn for enjoyment. They support the use of online games and activities to create goals that users can achieve and increase the satisfaction of learning.

Nielsen, J. (1995-2007). *Alertbox: Current Issues in Web Usability*. Retrieved March 15, 2007 from <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/>.

Alertbox is a collection of online column by usability expert Jakob Nielsen. The columns cover topics from designing websites for seniors to eye tracking studies. Most of the columns are based on larger reports done by his company that are available for purchase. Nielsen maintains that the most important aspect of web design is the user's experience of it.

Nielsen, J. (2000). *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders Publishing.

Nielsen covers usability practices and principles in this book from the year 2000. Using many examples of good and bad usability with website screen shoots, Nielsen describes the promising practices in page, content and site design while always pushing for universality.

Self-Represented Litigants Network. (2006). *Best Practices in Court-Based Self Help Programs for the Self Represented: Concepts, Attributes and Issues for Exploration*. National Center for State Courts. Retrieved March 14, 2007 from http://www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications/KIS_ProSeBestPracticesSRLN.pdf.

This document provides a list of promising practices from an American network helping people who represent themselves in court. One of the practices is in web design, and points to the importance of good design as well as having information that is accessible to low literacy users.

Skaalid, B. (1999). *Web Design for Instruction*. Retrieved March 16, 2007 from <http://www.usask.ca/education/coursework/skaalid/summary.htm>.

Skaalid takes general promising practices in web design and situates it specifically in an educational framework. She covers areas such as site design, navigation, usability, page design and any use of multimedia. The site was created as part of a Master's of Educational Communication and Technology.

Williams, R. (2004). *The Non-Designer's Design Book. 2nd Edition*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.

Williams is an expert in design layouts and covers the basics in this book. The visual layout of a web page needs to have as much thought put into it as the content. Proximity, alignment, repetition and contrast are the main rules she espouses. While most of the book is based on physical and not digital design, the theories can be used in either type of design.

APPENDIX C.

Examples of Websites Exhibiting Promising Practices

Laws for Landlords and Tenants in Alberta

<http://www.landlordandtenant.org>

This website was created by the Legal Studies Program as an informal learning tool that explains the law in a life event pattern which follows the process of the renter and/or landlord. The website provides access to legal information and to the laws that govern the relationship between landlords and tenants in Alberta.

Profile and Findability

- Website linked from (and to) its government and funding partners – also linked to a good selection of credible public legal education organizations
- Recognizable icon found on related materials like bookmarks, tip sheets, and fridge magnets

Home Page

- Strong identity established right away and carried throughout the site – identity changes slightly when moving from the Tenants site to the Landlords site
- Title is clear in its focus
- Life event approach to the legal information – lays out the sections clearly in the left hand menu
- Link to search is found on the home page (and on each subsequent page of the website)

Content

- Provides layers of information – building on each layer with more detailed information for those users who require it
- Information is organized in a few different formats: as Just the Facts or FAQs
- Printer-friendly pages
- Content is written in plain language in a succinct manner

Navigation

- Bread crumbs, a back button, and a well-developed left hand menu (with trees as the user scrolls over) provide user with multiple access points to the information and the ability to always know where they are and where they are going
- Site map is available in the footer of every web page of the website
- Links external to the website open to a new window

Search

- Link to the search is clearly available from every page
- Helpful option to search only the landlords' site, only the tenants' site or both – the results page makes it obvious what page the result is from

Accessibility

- Text is divided into logical groupings

Educational Design

- Well-designed as an informal learning tool accommodating different information seeking behaviours by providing multiple access points for information and multiple ways to get the legal information
- Visible layout follows the life cycle of a renter or a landlord and the user can straightforwardly understand the flow of the legal information they are reading

Evaluation

- Link to “Contact Us” included in the footer of every page

Law Courts Education Society of B.C.

<http://www.lawcourtsed.ca/index.cfm>

The Law Courts Education Society is a non-profit organization providing educational programs and services about the justice system in Canada and British Columbia. The website helps the public understand how the justice system works and also helps those people working within the system to better understand the justice-related issues that different people in our communities face.

Profile and Findability

- Recognizable icon in top left hand corner
- Google link search reveals links and partnerships to over 250 other websites including most key public legal education organizations in Canada

Home Page

- Search box available right from the home page as is the site map
- Tagline is clear and there is a direct link to “about us” underneath the organization's name
- Home page has meaningful icons and text that describe the main sections of the site and the information you'll find there
- Strong visual design established with both colour and icons that are followed throughout the site

Content

- Comfortable and conversational tone – plain language
- Use of text and icon interchangeable for information regarding contact, site map, home and print
- Uses a variety of formats including audio-visual and video streaming – innovative learning resources
- Print-friendly pages
- Text organized into digestible chunks of information

Navigation

- Multiple access points for the user to get to the information
- Bread crumb trail and a side bar menu with a helpful navigational tree lets user know where they are at all times
- Site map accessible from every page
- Menu on top of page as well as bottom of page

Search

- Search box accessible from every page (word search)
- Search results are displayed in a recognizable manner and each result is accompanied by a “last updated” date

Accessibility

- Site makes use of some text and image combinations
- Video streaming of important legal information

Educational Design

- Each section clearly identifies for whom the section is designed to educate (youth, educators, and self-represented litigants)
- User can sign up for email updates

Evaluation

- User can contact organization through more than one means – including an email access from every page

Canadian Consumer Information Gateway – Office of Consumer Affairs **<http://consumerinformation.ca>**

The Office of Consumer Affairs set out to bring together on a single website the very best consumer information, tools and services available from the most objective and reliable sources. The result is the *Canadian Consumer Information Gateway* – a groundbreaking strategic partnership between more than 400 federal departments and agencies, provincial and territorial ministries and NGO partners. The Gateway contributes to a dynamic and competitive economy in Canada by

empowering consumers and helping to ensure a fair marketplace where all businesses respect consumer protection laws.

Profile and Findability

- Recognizable icon – used on other credible websites and pages (Government of Canada) and elsewhere
- Linked to over 2,000 organizations in Canada and elsewhere (Google link search)

Home Page

- Clearly defines what the website is all about
- Multiple directories to the site's content – using a variety of text, icons, and appropriate graphics
- Search made available through two different and clearly identifiable ways and is specific to this particular site (not to the entire Office of Consumer Affairs site)
- Identity is strongly established through colours, icons and text

Content

- Comfortable and conversational tone – plain language
- Content presented in appropriate legal categories
- Sense of identity reinforced through the content
- Date provided when information was last revised

Navigation

- Multiple access points to the information
- Site map accessible from every page
- Menus available at all times – user always knows where they are

Search

- Link to the search is accessible from every page – sometimes using an icon accompanying a text description, sometimes not
- Can search using a number of different filters
- Provides a description of the types of results found in a search (i.e., documents, related sites, etc.)

Accessibility

- The Consumer Information Gateway website is developed according to accessibility standards which require compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) Guidelines Version 1.0 – Priority 1 and 2 Checkpoints.
- The notice regarding accessibility is available from a link on the top menu bar on every page
- An icon sometimes accompanies a text description

Evaluation

- Link to “Contact Us” available from every page of the website in the top menu bar

Family Justice – Ministry of the Attorney General

<http://www.ag.qov.bc.ca/family-justice/index.htm>

This website is part of the larger B.C. government website and provides general information about a number of issues of interest to BC couples who have separated or who are about to separate. It may also be useful for guardians and other family members, such as grandparents, who may be involved in making important decisions about the family and its future.

Profile and Findability

- Good site profile – often produced in the top 3 of search engine
- Linked to almost 50 other websites (Google link search)

Home Page

- Home page clearly identified with accompanying short description that makes it obvious to the user the purpose of the site
- Allows for the life event approach to legal information as it relates to separation and divorce

Content

- Personal, conversational tone to explain the legal issues – plain language
- Use of lists, and FAQs to present the information
- Words highlighted in green are obviously linked directly to a glossary that opens up in a small window with succinct definition
- Printable version of each page

Navigation

- Bread crumb trail and a side bar menu alerts user where they are within the Family Justice website as well as the larger B.C. government website
- Well-developed navigational tree on side bar and within body text provides a clear visual map of where user is within the website

Search

- Search box accessible from every page (word search)
- Search results provides suggestions if a word is misspelled

Accessibility

- Footer on every page describes that Internet Standards require that government Web content be developed using the HTML 4.01 (transitional) standard that is described on the Website of the World Wide Web

Consortium (W3C) – footer further describes that ongoing web design and development work is being guided by the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative

Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General – Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee

<http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/pgt>

The Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee is part of the Family Justice Services Division of the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ontario, Canada. The Office is responsible for protecting mentally incapable people, protecting the public's interest in charities, searching for heirs, investing perpetual care funds, and dealing with dissolved corporations.

Site Profile and Findability

- Ranks very high in Google search
- 155 outside pages/pathways link to main site – provides numerous critical access points

Home Page

- Search box, site map and “contact us” are readily available
- Page is clean with strong visual design
- Text is straightforward – provides a clear sense of purpose

Content

- Subjects/topics grouped with well-developed headings are in bold
- Clearly states “What We Do”
- Clear concise titling for links that make sense (e.g., “Charitable Donations – Get the Facts”)
- Important information located on prime real estate of the page
- Minimal scrolling
- Obvious indication of when page was last updated/reviewed
- Use FAQs, PDFs, and various other formats to dispense information - information listed in topics

Navigation

- Top navigation provides consistent access to key links (e.g., “contact us”, sitemap, search, etc.) – menu repeated in footer
- Reliable breadcrumb trails let user know their location in the site
- Left hand menu bar provides consistent access to full site for Ministry
- Back button available
- Site pages do not open to new windows

Search

- Search is available from every page
- Search clearly states what site is being searched (e.g., “search the MAG website”)

Evaluation

- Link to “Contact Us” gives phone numbers, link to online form that can be emailed

In Kind Canada

<http://www.inkindcanada.ca>

In Kind Canada, a Public Foundation, is in the business of matching corporations' surplus supplies and equipment with the needs of charities. The In Kind Canada program currently works with some 1,200 charities countrywide.

Site Profile and Findability

- Ranks very high in Google search – provides numerous access points
- 25 outside pages/pathways link to main site
- Recognizable icons used
- Good example of partnering with the “Donate Now through HelpCanada” button

Content

- Visually appealing - good use of white space and text placement
- Content organized into blocks of text
- Clear headings to information using plain language – conversational tone used
- History of the organization easily accessible

Navigation

- Top and bottom navigation bars as well a left hand menu provide multiple access points to information
- Bread crumbs show users where they are on the site at all times

Search

- Search feature accessible for all pages

Evaluation

- “Contact Us” provides address, phone numbers, email