

CASE STUDY

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Data Archive (SAMHDA) Website Overhaul

Client: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

The Data Archive serves researchers, epidemiologists, and public health professionals across the U.S. by making hundreds of annual survey data sets available and providing web-based analytical and visualization tools. In 2019 ICF won the contract to re-envision and redesign the outdated SAMHDA website. I contributed research to the project over a 14 month period.

Phase 1: Research user types and needs

Traditionally most SAMHDA users have been sophisticated researchers, although some policy-focused professionals do occasionally use the site. The client wanted to understand SAMHDA's user types better, including their needs and frustrations with the current site.

- Developed facilitation guide and led 14 interviews with epidemiologists, researchers, public health professionals, and non-profit executives about their use of the site.
- Developed the personas that informed key redesign strategy and design concept.

Insights:

- A participant's role alone—e.g., epidemiologist, data analyst—did not indicate which features and content types (data files or reports) they used or how they utilized them. The objective of the organization at which they worked and its position within the data collection and sharing ecosystem were equally as important.

"Activity-based" Personas:

- "Heavyweight": Highly technical data and content consumers; analysts
- "Middleweight": Sophisticated data and content consumers; researchers and analysts
- "Lightweight": Intermediaries in the ecosystem; reporters and translators
- General Public: Often closest to those suffering from substance use and mental health issues

Recommendation:

- "Plain language" would need to be integrated carefully throughout the site to make it accessible to new visitors, especially the intermediaries who translated research to the public, without compromising the needs of frequent visitor.

Deliverable: Personas + Insights Report (February 2020)

Phase 2: Heuristic evaluation of the existing SAMHDA site

Conducted a heuristic evaluation of the existing site to identify and document issues across six foundational experience categories: (1) Navigation and organization; (2) Layout and presentation; (3) Content and labeling; (4) Interaction and feedback; (5) Search optimization and tools; and (6) Accessibility

- *Pain points:* Poor navigation, poor organization, highly technical labeling.
- Findings informed decision making by the project lead and design team.

Deliverable: Heuristic Evaluation Report (May 2020)

Phase 3: Targeted research around publication search needs and frustrations

The client was acutely concerned about the poor reputation of the existing site's "bibliography" section. Users did not understand the relevance of the content its search returned and considered available results filters to be poor.

- Conducted five targeted interviews about the users' expectations for the "bibliography" page, as well as functionality the existing search page, results filters, and article detail page.
- Re-defined the purpose of the section and worked with content strategists to identify language to communicate the purpose and value of the section to site users, both new and returning.
- Shared findings and recommendations with the design team.

Deliverable: Bibliography + Labeling Summary Report (August 2020)

Phase 4a: Usability testing (broad) on prototype

Engaged participants in "think-aloud testing" to obtain feedback on the SAMHDA prototype site. Each session addressed:

(a) Usability – Does the site function as designed?

(b) User acceptance – Does the site meet user expectations?

- Developed research plan for usability testing on refreshed site
 - This included (a) identifying research objectives and (b) developing questions and task-based activities to elicit feedback.
- Moderated nine sessions over GoToMeeting.com.
- *Findings:* Some confusing labels; need for transition texts on several key pages; navigation dropdown hover issues; purpose of interactive tool unclear.
- Design and development team used the findings to revise the prototype.

Deliverable: Usability Testing Findings Report (January 2021)

Phase 4b: Usability testing (targeted) on revised prototype

Tested the revised prototype with staff internal to SAMHSA.

- Moderated five sessions over GoToMeeting.com.
- Synthesized and presented minor findings to design lead and project manager.

The new site was recently deployed on Wednesday, May 19, 2021. See: <https://datafiles.samhsa.gov/>

The deliverables listed here are proprietary, so I cannot share the files outright. However, I would be happy to walk through any of them during a conversation.