What do SMEs in Cornwall Want from a Website?

Spring: Evaluating a Workplace Support Website

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With thanks to the participants and associates who helped us.

Aims and Objectives

The European Centre of Environment and Human Health (www.ecehh.org) is exploring ways to interact with SMEs in Cornwall. As part of this, between July and September 2013, researchers piloted and formally evaluated a website ("Spring") for SMEs around responsible business practice, as one example of a useful online resource.

The overarching aim was to gauge enablers and barriers to SMEs using websites, and to indicate the feasibility of supporting SMEs at scale via this medium. Objectives were to get feedback on the website and explore what makes a useful web resource from the SME perspective: what it should provide and the forms delivery, presentation and support that are wanted and why. As well as identifying these as **incentives** to website use, we noted **barriers** to use and barriers to action which need to be addressed by a web resource.

We face a 'moving target' to support SMEs, in that over time, business climate changes, individual SMEs grow and priorities shift. For this reason, identifying underlying incentives and barriers to action is a useful way to look at SME resource needs and to weight preferences and priorities accordingly.

Overview of Study Findings

We had the help of over 50 business community stakeholders, who sent out information for us. Study conclusions are based on 20 SME directors who used the website and gave feedback via questionnaires, and (for 10 of these) via phone interviews as well (the latter in return for an hour's "Healthy Workplace" consultancy). The results help point to some key considerations when developing online resources for SMEs in Cornwall and beyond (see appendix for Sample demographic).

Incentives to Website Use

Provide:
- Support for behaviour: people are primarily **task-focused**: they want **checklists and guidelines to download**, but also want a combination of supporting web features. Their aims are largely to answer queries, learn from others, feel supported, and share information with staff.
- Reliability: online resources must be trusted, as a **'touchstone'** for information when people need it. Web content needs to be **up to date and linked** to other key sites.
- **Engagement over time**: meeting needs as they arise and providing ongoing value
- Range: people want a **variety** of ways to access information

Deliver:
- Starting points for information: people want "**stepping stones**" so that information is delivered in increments from the starting point of their initial query.
- **Prompts and ways to track progress**: to engage them fully, people want extra support elements with the website, such as email prompts and updates
- **Good navigation and filtering**: to select and navigate content in clear, flexible ways

Present:
- **Video and case studies**: seen as useful ways to glean information from **other SMEs**
- **Text more than graphics**: for specific and clear information, text is more central to good user experience

- Desktop **computer and smartphone features**: whole website content was used mainly on desktops, but some features, such as updates, would be used via phones

Support via:
- Topic-based scheduled **events both online and face-to-face**, rather than via social media and forums
- The **role of the expert**: people value specialist input by phone, email and face-to-face support.
- A service linked to the website: people want **ongoing access to expertise** as needs arise, so use may only be sporadic.

Barriers to Website Use

Lack of IT skill was not a barrier to using online resources, but important things to avoid are:

- Providing too much **generic rather than specific** information
- Presenting information en mass, rather than cumulatively, in chunks, **or without sufficient navigation** throughout
- Making **text too small** and too crowded on the page

Barriers to Action: Things to Address

In this study, 'action' related to responsible business practice, but barriers reflect more general ones and the **support needs to address** via online resources:

- **Time:** a major barrier to action or even to looking for resources to help
- **Confidence:** for example around compliance with regulations
- **Not knowing where to start** (and lacking skills or knowledge)
- **Lack of support** (and feeling isolated)

Ways to address them:

- **Key documents** and text that is specific enough
- **Expert Support** to help with **decision making** at problem points as they arise
- **Practical Support to help prioritise** actions or **motivate** staff to take things forward
- **Learning from other SMEs.** Seeing what other SMEs do; for skills and knowledge (ideas and problem solving) and to a lesser extent for 'feeling connected' and networking for future growth.

The Spring Website

We developed a prototype website called "Spring" on responsible business practice around topic headings, which were assessed as meaningful to SMEs in a small test phase: Green business, Health, safety and welfare, Healthier staff, Managing staff, overview pages on 'Responsible Business Practice,' and the Study details, consent for Study participation, data protection, etc.

A variety of **presentation** formats were included: **video, text, podcast, and filtering tools** (e.g. a 'question-creator' and a 'self–diagnostic' cartoon slide-bar).

There was also a range of **engagement styles** on the site: the **filtering tools** (for decision making); **case studies** (for social learning); "**Ask the experts'** by email; '**Events'** section (support and networking) **guidelines; checklists; online tools; templates and downloads** (a tool box); **articles; quotes and FAQs** (for learning and reflecting).
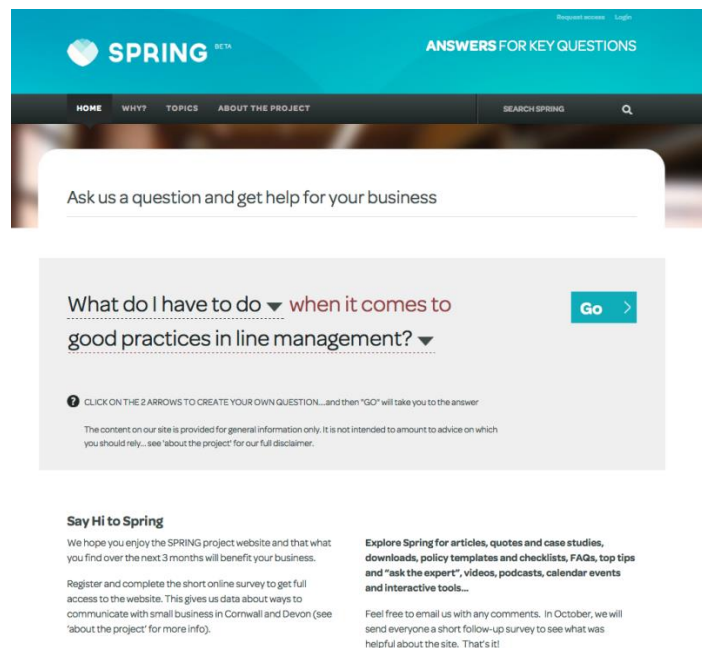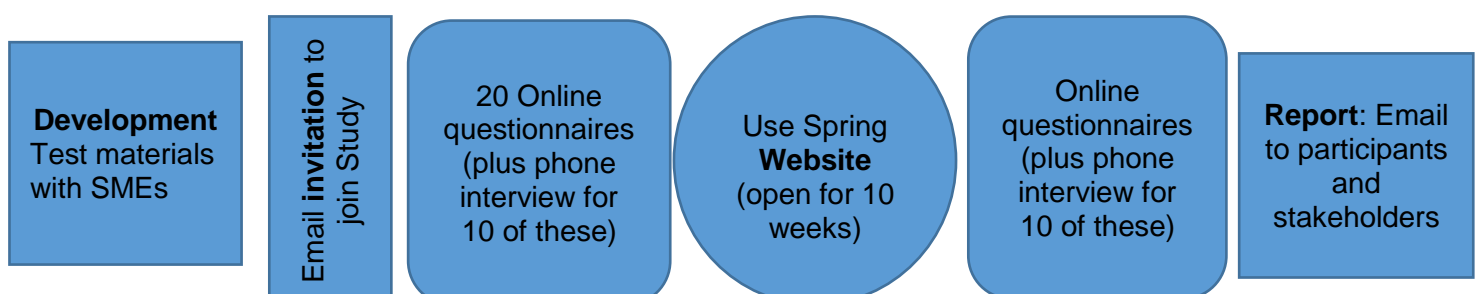

The Study

This was an opportunity to test the feasibility of recruiting SMEs online, so we allowed for two levels of data collection:
   (1) With a large enough response (e.g. 200 SMEs), a comparison between website use and non-website use groups
   (2) Regardless of response rate, feedback on people's experience of using the website and their preferences around online resources.

This second level was our final data set, collected via online questionnaires before and after using the website (open for 10 weeks); and semi-structured phone interviews as well, if they had been offered.

Study Sequence

Online Study Recruitment

Online invitations to use 'Spring' and take part in the evaluation were emailed to SME directors. Recruitment was via stakeholders: business support organisations, a news network, University research centres, and business-to-business contacts. Some stakeholders also used their websites and social media as well as sending emails.

Recruitment Lessons Learnt

We asked SMEs to help us by investing precious time in the evaluation. Information about the site may have looked interesting, but people had to commit to giving feedback as part of using the resource.

Easy to Understand, Quick to Access

Reading the Study conditions was an initial task, requiring several steps and putting people off before full access to the site. The prototype nature of the site meant the homepage introduction was also not clear enough. Instead, stakeholders suggested using a short video clip to explain the aims of the Study. The novel information filter tool was also the first item seen; and this was not clearly understood by everyone. Putting this further within the site and re-wording it would help.

Seasonal Effect

Recruitment was during the summer, and this reduced the time people had available (and therefore the priority) to try out a prototype resource, or address issues that could wait. It also meant stakeholders, who were generally very helpful, were sometimes on leave and unable to follow up emails.

Grow Engagement over Time

The website as well as the recruitment drive were only open for a short time. Interviews showed that **longevity is an important factor** in engagement for a variety of reasons reflected in the key findings.

Key Findings

Level of IT Use

Respondents were contacted via email and so all used computers. They and their staff were comfortable using computers (although some felt very 'inexpert'), used them frequently for work, and in a range of ways (including online storage and document sharing and searching via websites, blogs and youtube). Some also used online tutorials and webinars to get information.

- **All used desktop computers**, but fewer (only around half), used smart phones and touchscreens for work.

- Most had a business presence on social media, but did not use it themselves to find information.

- **Social media and online forums were <u>not</u> key ways to get information**.

Things a Website Should Provide

Task Focus
People are mainly **task-focused** when they use an online resource, addressing needs as they arise over time. Further learning and exploring a website leads on from this starting point. **Online resources should support this approach**.

Trust and Reliability
A priority for a good website was to be **reliable and up to date**. It must include documents and links for key organisations and current legislation (or even reference latest research). Reliability was seen as also developing with time and a proven track record of delivering what's needed.

- People wanted a site 'in their pocket' that they could **return to time and time again**.

Similarly, trust came from promotion channels. People were 'open and looking for any good resources they can find,' noticed key logos, and accepted emails from reliable sources. It was natural for good resources to be recommended and referred to them by other SMEs.

- Local networks and casual business contacts wanted online **resource 'hubs'** to refer to for **key information**.

A Range of Website Features
People want a full **range** of features on business websites. See appendix 2 for table of ranked 'Characteristics Wanted from a Business Website.'

On 'Spring', the most popular were **specific, text-based information** that could be referred to (i.e. guidelines, checklists, downloads); and resources for **learning from others** (i.e. Ask the Experts (email query), FAQs and case studies).

Just under half also wanted **information-tailoring** tools (i.e. self-diagnosis and filter questions); and **updates** in the form of 'Top Tips,' news and 'Hot Topics.'

Ways to Deliver Information

Stepping Stones and Starting Points
Lots of information in one place made people feel overwhelmed and reduced confidence. Other key business sites with a lot of content were criticised for this, even if they were trusted (the right information would be there somewhere…).

People mainly wanted to find an answer to a specific query, and to find it quickly. If they wanted to learn or explore, or were open to that once they had accomplished their task, these would be the starting points; and they wanted any extra information given in chunks, preferably cumulative and progressive. Suggestions included:

- Amazon / ebay style: 'people who viewed this also viewed…'
- Show a list or cluster of related documents (e.g. all from one organisation)
- Sign up to regular email with prompts for next steps / more ideas on this topic
- Short online courses

Prompting and Tracking Progress

Nearly everyone wanted 'ways to track progress'; and this was important for confidence and **stepwise progression**. Suggestions included:

- Regular emails
- Modules to work through
- Online action-tracking to keep a log of their achievements
- Collective action tracking
- Tangible outputs to print from the website: downloadable resources, such as guidelines and checklists.

Search and Navigation with Visual Arrays and Lists

Topic headings on 'Spring' reportedly made sense, and helped cluster information. People also liked the idea of **clustering formats** (e.g. videos, or checklists), so that having used one, you might look at others too.

People wanted a better **map of the site** and the content depicted in lists, so that they could see arrays of content and scan these for a relevant document / topic (e.g. include tree diagrams and menus on sub-pages as well as main pages).

People want to see where they were in these lists, and **leave a trail** to retrace steps easily. This was more important than a search function. Search functions were often seen as inadequate on sites, as you had to guess terms or they prevented backtracking, or you did not know what to search for (you might know when you saw it).

Spring's Information Filter

Most people tried the filter question, which took them to content clusters based on levels of need: 'what had to be done for (topic)', 'what could be done better for (topic)', 'why (topic) is important'.

This was an idea prototype. It was seen by most as a useful and novel tool, worth trying in order to filter information in addition to other search tools. However, it was unclear for some; and for others, not liked because it needed **more drilling down to specific issues**.

Specificity of information and **search methods need to be easy and quick to understand** as well as clever. Although the filter was seen as unusual and interesting, it was confusing as the first item on the home page and could be better presented as an option rather than main feature.

Useful Presentation Formats

Video is Useful in Different Ways

Video was liked or deemed 'potentially useful' if it is **short and specific enough** to learn from. This could be in terms of:

- Role rehearsal
- Demonstrating a procedure or checklist for good practice
- Explaining, reviewing or expanding on topics (including short lectures)
- Inspiring with examples and learning from others (e.g. case studies)

Video was mainly useful if **combined with other content** to download and keep, or bullet pointers on the video footage.

Case Study was a Popular Website Feature

People liked websites for time saving, including **efficiency in connecting with other SMEs**; and importantly, learning by seeing what others do.

Case study was a popular website feature. Even though people are task-focused, there is a strong element of being able to learn from other **SMEs, from any sector**; and a respect for others bothering to pass on insights.

Respondents saw all SMEs as facing the same basic issues; seeing people 'further down the line' or 'with something to say', was useful. A case study along with contact details could be a useful opening for further interaction, e.g. if people wanted to get in touch with the company if they wanted to ask more.

Cartoons and Graphics to Support Text?

The cartoon self-diagnostic was liked by some and not others. Here, the idea of self-diagnosis was **good if you were exploring**, but not a focus for most people who are on task-oriented visits.

Cartoons were useful for highlighting topic headings (similarly infographics might help introduce broad topics by depicting main points at a glance) but were not necessary and not useful for the specificity of information often needed.

For this sample, fun and friendliness were elements of a good website, but only minor ones. **Clean, uncluttered**, and functional appearance was more central to good user experience.

Using Smartphones

People want a range of website features done well. However, some features may be more suited to smartphones than others.

Most people accessed the site from desktop computers rather than tablets and smartphones, although 'Spring' worked well on all these.

A handful of respondents wanted to use **specific features on smart phones**; these were **updates, snippets and tools** (i.e. podcasts, Top Tips, Hot Topics / News and monitoring tools), rather than in-depth information (i.e. guidelines, articles) that were better viewed on desktop computers.

Support alongside a Website

Online Social Exchange?

People did not want online forums; these were seen as not efficient, relevant, or useful. Instead, online social exchange could be done in a limited way, and with **expert input as the pivot.**

Tips

Scheduled focused discussions around a topic, led by experts, but allowing others to ask questions, would be a good format. The model of IBM's "collaborative Jams" (https://www.collaborationjam.com) was noted as an example of this.
 	
   Conversations could be joined or (more importantly) recorded on a site, and looked at when time allowed.
 	
Some said it was important that these did not rely on large numbers of SMEs to make them work, and that they would accumulate as a storehouse of pertinent problems solved.
 	
   A proven track record could emerge, and this could build reliance and trust
 	
Some said this was an efficient way to mentor other SMEs and share expertise, as well as a way to engage their own staff.

Ask the Experts

A website function of 'ask the experts' **(emailing them with queries)** was seen as very useful. It was available but not used by participants on 'Spring', due to the short time span. The function may not be used often, but people want it there.

Ideally, it must not replace contact by phone (if not face-to-face) with experts; is useful, for quick queries that came to mind, even out of hours. Again, a store of Q and A's from these questions to the experts could be built and remain on the site for others to look at.

As part of a website hub, a **group of experts** would be needed and their credentials known, because some SMEs would require niche expertise or assurance that their query could be forwarded to someone suitable.

Phone and Face-to Face Support

People want **expert support on-hand** along with a website. For some, it was important that this support was local.

People want to talk to an expert on issues when needed: to double-check actions, get pointers to next steps, and be given some 'Do's and Don'ts'.

Phone support could often be enough rather than face-to-face contact.

Some wanted face-to-face help occasionally; for forward planning or motivating staff to put change into practice. They wanted this service to be easily available, with the website as the 'hub' for points of contact and supporting resource materials.

A good web resource was seen as more **time-efficient and accessible** than training events, but some people also valued meetings with experts and SME mentors, as part of a series of events. Again this could be linked to a website for additional resources.

Project Outcomes and Conclusion

Participants gave feedback on the 'Spring' website and their resource needs; and we are grateful for their time, effort and valuable comments. As well as assessing needs, we aimed to provide a useful, temporary resource for the SMEs involved. All participants said they had benefited from using the website. At a minimum, with not much time to use it over the 10 weeks it was open, seeds were planted for the future, and people were more interested in some topics.

Nearly all had taken action since using 'Spring'; discussing, planning or taking action on issues across all topic areas (health safety and welfare, healthier staff, managing staff and being green) with the most often cited action in relation to staff management.

Using 'Spring' also helped some people to save time and money; and prompted others to join a business organisation, forum or network.

Most people wanted to do more on the 'Spring' topics, and all were confident about doing this to some extent; but the key barrier remained of not having enough time.

'Lack of time' alone was cited by only half. Alongside this, other barriers were 'not knowing where to start' and lack of skills, staff interest and support (cost, or their own lack of interest were not barriers for these participants).

The results of this study are only from a small sample of SMEs, but they show interesting themes and indicate incentives and ways to address barriers via web resources, along with other support. A website can be a time-efficient and successful resource for SMEs if it is accessible and appropriate. If it is trusted as reliable, up to date and supportive, it allows SMEs' confidence to flourish, and their time to be well spent.

Appendices

1   Sample Characteristics   *Back*

Company size: from 5 - 30 employees, with over half of these being small (5-10 employees).

Sectors: The main sample of 20 SMEs were from a range of business sectors in Cornwall (although not water and waste, marine, and manufacturing). Eight participants did not define themselves from given sectors, and gave an alternative.

Number of SMEs in the Study from each Business Sector

Sector		Number of SMEs
Service and retail*	●●●●●	5
Other**	●●●	3
Digital Technologies (IT design and software development, Media)	●●●	3
Tourism, Recreation & Leisure	●●●	3
Medical & Health	●●●	3
Food and drink	●●●	3
Renewables & Low Carbon Technologies	●	1
*Logisitcs, Electrical circuit inspector, Retail, Legal admin, Timber merchant **Agriculture & food (community farm), Construction and wholesale, Survival training		

● Questionnaires and interviews
● Questionnaires only

Location: SMEs came from Newquay (2), Truro, Playing Place, Pool (2) Camborne, Redruth, Helston, Falmouth (4), Penryn, Constantine, St Just Penwith
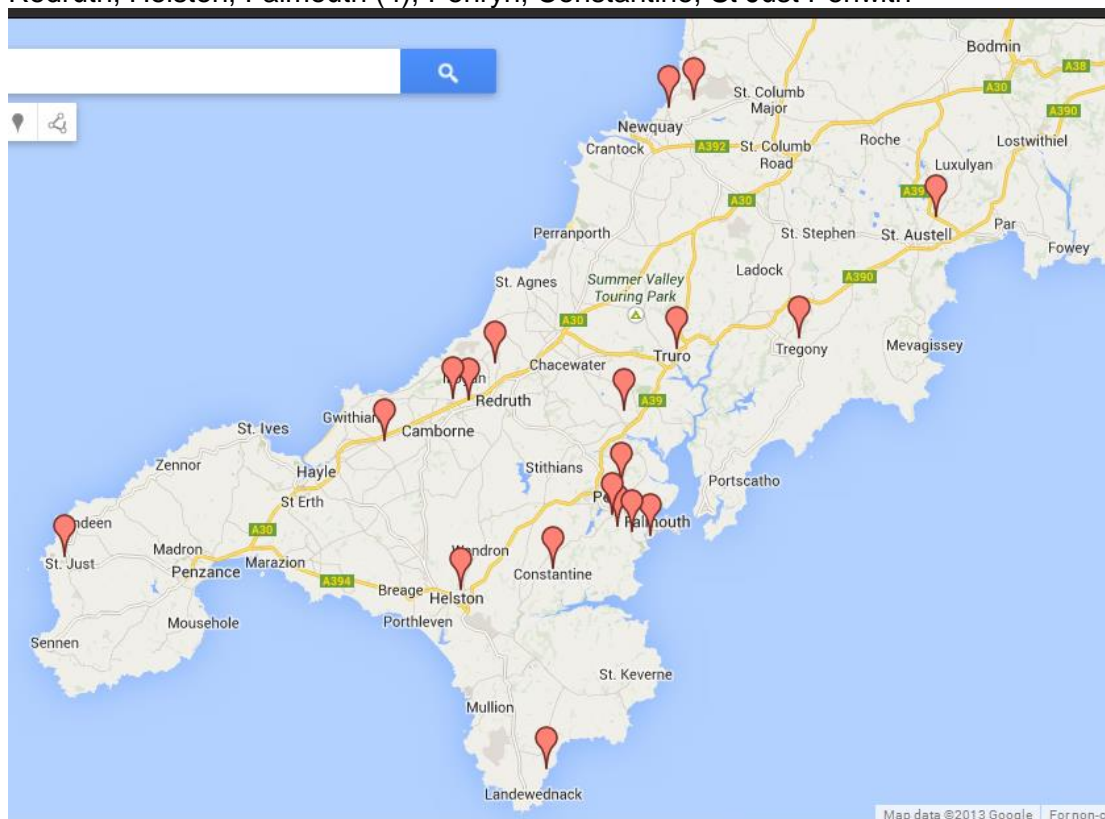
2   Characteristics Wanted from a Business Website   *Back*

What makes a good business website for you? Please rank the following in order of importance. Number 1 is most important and number 11 is least important		
Item		**Overall Rank**
Up to date		1
Lots of content		2
You can ask questions (search)		3
You can ask questions (ask expert)		4
"Bite size" bits of information		5
Online case studies- and seeing what others do		6
Links you to other business online		7
Friendly		8
Links you to other businesses face to face		9
Fun		10
other important things:		11

Links to relevant legislation etc.

References for further resources

Do's and Don't's (what to avoid is as important as what to do, since the omissions and misapplication of advice causes the problems)