

Short popular guidebook

for the production of popular state-of-environment report on the web

The problem of the lack of information in the information technology era somehow resembles the problem of the lack of drinking water on the planet 2/3 of the surface of which is covered by oceans and seas. The information contained in the state-of-environment reports produced by ministries of environment and measured rather in kilograms than in kilobites, has to be purified like sea water which needs distillation to become drinkable, to produce the dry precipitation that has any consumer value. The existing practice of environmental reporting is anything but simple and clear for an ordinary reader and environmental reporting is largely of no value to general public. In other words it is not popular.

Why should a report be popular?

What are we talking about – a report is written for the purpose of reporting, not for an ordinary reader. But if you want your work to make sense and get at the end of pipeline something meaningful then your message has to reach decision makers on different levels, starting with government and ending with kitchen.

Information *per se* has no consumer value. Only useful information has one. Your information product becomes valuable when it is useful not just for a limited group of government employees, but for a large category of users: the general public. On top of that, if you represent a state organization responsible for national or regional environmental reporting, your popular report will visibly demonstrate your usefulness for taxpayers.

In the last ten years mostly due to the development of internet the production of information is ahead of its consumption by ten times. Only woman to writing this guidebook the Google search engine contained 18 058 044 651 articles. What will change if you add another 50 web pages? Your information will be demanded only in case a user will increase his or her quality of life. It depends mostly on its availability, clarity and simplicity of presentation, which makes it popular. Otherwise you just increase the amount of data garbage and pollute informational environment.

Some theory. The chain: Information-Knowledge-Will-Action.

Usefulness of information is determined after all by those actions that a user undertook as a result of its consumption. An information can be taken in passively – then he goes into the brain storage until the further use. Most of such information we do not realize, it sinks into the unconscious, as psychologists say. The brain is protecting itself from the excess of information by installing filters which help to disregard the useless one and store it in the remote areas of memory. If the information can be extracted by the consciousness easily on the first demand Then it is transferred into knowledge which in turn can become part of the belief system. But knowledge itself doesn't guarantee a sustainable change of behavior. For example the smokers know that smoking is harmful, but this knowledge does not motivated most of them to quit. The takes the act of will Foley's information to produce the conscious action. Thus we build the chain "information-knowledge-will-action". We might note in brackets that information can directly stimulate action bypassing this stage of knowledge, but that will be a reflex response, not involving consciousness, like in the case of Pavlov's dog.

One of the numerous communication theories – the social judgment theory – states that Only the information that is close to our belief system can be motivating. The rest is simply trashed. The density of action is determined by the emotional charge of information – whether it is positive or negative. Negative information in general produces two types of reaction – either fight or flight

and one in between: stupor. That's why the information has to be positive if possible, providing with solutions. If a receiver cannot change situation then a negative message will be squeezed into the periphery of consciousness. Later the same information will be either ignored or actively rejected. This means that in order to make positive changes the information should be close to the zone of anchor beliefs and be balanced and emotionally charged. The other conclusion of this theory is that behavior changes triggered by information occur slowly, if happen at all.

How to make a report popular?

The recipes simple: the report has to cater the information needed of users. The broader is your target audience or, in other words, the group of people to whom you address your message, the vaster spectrum of needs you'll have. Indeed, the information needs of students differ considerably from the information needs of housekeepers. However if you seek the attention of the majority of population, the principal of everyone's satisfaction should be your guiding one. Already and you have to balance the quality and quantity of information. The intent to put in the report all the available information can be devastating.

So, let's summarize: the make a report popular one needs clarity and simplicity (but not primitiveness) of the presentation of material, its obvious connection with real life – that kind of information that can be transformed into a concrete (preferably simple) action, increasing the quality of life.

Working with text

- Use only reliable information sources – thus you will ensure your users' trust;
- Select topics what would be of interest for your reader, and remember to explain it clearly. Start with the clear message.
- Prioritize the information and organize it with hyperlinks. The more important/usable should be on the higher level of access, reference materials and data tables on the lowest.
- Check the text for inconsistencies: one part of your popular report should not contradict another;
- Translate the text into clear and simple language;
- Do not forget about spelling and grammar;
- Avoid special terms and professional jargon (however when necessary special terms, measurement units, indicators etc can be used with explanation of their meaning);
- The same applies to acronyms: UIEO (use in emergency only) and provide with deciphering.
- Compose a short and meaningful key phrase, which summarizes the contents of a section and highlight it graphically;
- Include examples with which a user can easily associate oneself;
- Provide with practical recommendations how to improve the quality of environment;
- If you doubt your writing skills – entrust the final editing to a professional journalist;

- Keep the consistency of style. Use one font of standard size for the main text on all pages. Highlight headings.
- Align text blocks: chaotically placed text annoys and exposes low professionalism;
- Use minimal number of fonts;

Working with graphics

- Preserve consistency in graphic style;
- Support all meaningful figures with graphs and/or diagrams;
- Use minimalistic color palette on a web-page – too much color is distracting. Do not decorate your page with multicolored inscriptions or heavily loaded graphics.
- Mind composition: text blocks and graphics in the layout should be balanced. More dense and dark colors are always “heavier”.
- Maps are self-sustainable graphic information pieces, exploit them – many users are specifically looking for maps on web-sites;
- Graphics should contain the essential information – units of measurement, data source(s), legend and title – otherwise it is of no use.
- A spoonful of humor won’t hurt – some cartoons will loosen the deadly grip of statistics;
- Quality photos are always good, however they should develop your thought, not repeat it in graphic form;
- Do not forget about copyright when using images, if publication is permitted do not forget to list information about an author of a photo, picture or map;
- If you doubt your artistic skills – entrust the final touches to a professional designer;

Working with web

- Start with the site map, don’t forget to place it on your web-site later;
- Make site navigation as easy as possible: users are either busy or lazy and the people’s attention is limited. Use “Forward” and “Back” buttons and allow simple access between different sections without returning to the home page;
- Use web-script which marks visited pages with different color, it helps with navigation;
- Install a search engine;
- Use hyperlinks to build a three-level system of information, sending all references and tables with support data on the third lowest level;
- Allow magnification of graphs, diagrams and maps in the text and additionally group them on a separate page according to sections;
- Install a feedback page (or use an on-line survey) enabling easier communication with your users, place the link to it on the home page;
- If you doubt your web-construction skills – entrust the final assembling and testing of your site to a professional web-designer.
- Make a web-page fit the screen, by all means try to avoid scrolling.