Communications and Outreach Report

Indiana University Office of Sustainability

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Introduction

Communications is a cornerstone of many successful organizations, and the IU Office of Sustainability will depend on communications and outreach to expand its reach on campus and beyond. To quote from the IUOS mission statement:

“The mission of the Indiana University Task Force on Campus Sustainability is to develop a framework for Indiana University’s plan for sustainability. The university defines sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Specifically, seven areas will be considered:

1. Education, Outreach, and Student Engagement: Promote awareness of sustainability goals and foster environmental literacy among the campus community through academic and co-curricular avenues as well as through academic research. Collaborate in sustainability outreach efforts with the surrounding community.”

The prominence given to outreach and education efforts in this section of the mission statement underscores the importance placed on this element of IUOS operations. Educating the public both on campus and in the surrounding community is crucial to the overall sustainability mission. The first area of the mission statement speaks to this point, but there is an important element of our communications operation that involves getting the word out about our projects in the other six emphasis areas: Resource Use/Recycling, Energy, Built Environment, Environmental Quality/Land Use, Transportation and Food. For the IUOS programs in all of these areas to have the maximum impact, they will need to be marketed to the community (campus and off-campus) in a way that allows them to be educational and inspiring.

This summer, the primary emphasis of the Communications and Outreach Internship was on developing the tools for IUOS to effectively communicate with its communities. A secondary goal was to develop the outlines of a general communications strategy. This report reflects that
structure. We first describe the tools that have been brought into the IUOS communications shop and how we might best utilize them. The second section gives an overview of the most accessible media outlets to disseminate information and press releases for the office. Finally, we will discuss the overall communications strategy of the office and give some ideas about the best way to approach communications going forward.
Communication Products

IUOS Website

The central element of online communications for IUOS is the main website. It is the main point of entry for people who want to find out about the IU Office of Sustainability, and serves as a point of departure for the various other forms on information about IUOS on the Web.

This summer one of our main goals was to overhaul the site that IUOS inherited from the IU Sustainability Task Force (Figure 1). Web programmer Andy Deluce was hired by the office to create the page with input and feedback from Bill Brown, Michael Hamburger, Emilie Rex and Communications Intern Andy Davis. Throughout the summer, we worked simultaneously on updating the functionality of the old website and creating a new site to replace it.

Some of the significant changes to the existing site had to do with reformatting and rearranging the site, and making the updating process somewhat more user-friendly. We made some additions to the graphical elements of the front page and re-ordered some of the resources that are accessible through the rest of the site. We also continued to update the events calendar and news items on the page to give visitors some idea of the current situation at IUOS.

One of the largest additions to the old site was the Sustainability Clearinghouse, the product of a previous internship for the Task Force. The Clearinghouse is a collection of information and links for both the IU and Bloomington community, centering on the seven focus areas for sustainability. Finding ways to make this resource more widely utilized is an important task for IUOS going forward, as there is considerable promise in IUOS becoming an invaluable provider of sustainability resources to the community using the Clearinghouse and tools like it.
Figure 1: The IUOS Website (older version)

The other changes to the older site involved integrating two new online tools for IUOS: Picasa and Facebook. These will be explored further in their own sections.
The overhaul to the new site (figure 2) was an ongoing process through the summer and will continue into the fall as functions are added to the nascent site. The biggest focus points for the new site were a new information structure to the site and an attempt to make the site more aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly.

On the information structure side, we wanted to modify the existing structure of information that represented a mix between chronological and topical categorization. The goal was to create a site layout that was consistently topical, so that it would be easier to find information for users of the site. For example, the old site categorized intern reports by the time period the intern worked for the office. If you were looking for reports on campus energy issues, you might have to browse through each year’s reports to find what you were looking for. This issue would become more burdensome as further reports were added to the site and content was generally expanded.

The design we worked toward implementing tries to replicate the topical form of the Sustainability Advisory Board working areas, so that users of the site can immediately go to the topic they are interested in and then be presented with the cumulative resources from the site in that topic area. If a user were looking for energy reports, they would be presented with all of the intern reports that were concerned with energy, as well as the energy section from the Campus Sustainability Report and any other relevant material (class listings on energy, outside research on energy that IUOS is linking to, energy-related volunteer opportunities, etc.). The hope is that this system will make using the site a much more intuitive process for visitors and lead to greater utilization of the IUOS resources overall.

The other focus area was creating a look and feel to the site that more clearly reflected the IUOS brand. Discussions about changing the layout and the design (color, fonts, etc.), as well as the type of content presented on entry to the site were key. The color decision was difficult, with some debate over whether to follow the traditional IU branding of cream and crimson or to make a statement by choosing
Figure 2: The new IUOS Website
a different color palette. Ultimately, we released the beta version of the new site with a voting option for users to select their favorite color scheme.

The layout we chose for the new site reflects some of the more recent designs on other IU homepages. Specifically, it was modeled after the IU News Room site with the addition of some elements that we liked from the IUB home page. We liked the opportunities presented by a three-column layout with vertical scrolling, as well as a revolving news/photo widget that allowed us to have an easily updated and fresh look to the page for frequent visitors. Another element, a grid of pictures representing navigation to the focus areas, was an in-house design and allowed us to add more graphical flair to the page.
IUOS Blog

One tool that had been used with some success in the past that we wanted to continue using was the IUOS blog (Figure 3). The task force had used wordpress blogs to allow the interns to update readers on their progress throughout their internships, and we thought this was a good model.

A new blog was created for the summer 2009 intern group, and we gave each intern a unique account for writing on it. We also asked each intern to blog as part of some functional workgroups that had been set up for the interns, and laid out a schedule of when each group should get their blog posts up. This was a bit of an experiment to try and ensure that there would be some regular posting on the blog, and it worked reasonably well, with most interns posting at least once during the summer, and some interns posting multiple times.

The blog also featured a category system to allow quick filtering to topics that the reader would be interested in, and a number of the interns took advantage of the blog’s media embedding to insert pictures of their projects or their previous work. Overall, the blog is a promising tool, but it was perhaps underutilized on the whole. If it is used for future intern groups, improved systems of encouraging posting on the blog should be examined.
Greening the City-County Building

One of the great things about the new Office of Sustainability is that it provides an opportunity for our interns to interact with all kinds of people and projects that are happening in the state. Since sustainability is such a broad topic, we’ve already been able to use the springboard of the Internship Seminar to invite guests to speak with us and to go on the road and take part in exciting projects that are taking place in our region.

Last week, we had a wonderful opportunity to take part in the greening of the City-County Building in Indianapolis. You can read all about the project in Sustain Indy’s own Press Release, but the key details for us were that:

1) Indianapolis’ Mayor and department of sustainability (Sustain Indy) are undertaking a project to “green” the building that hosts the greatest part of the Unigov functions.

2) SustainIndy and The Rocky Mountain Institute hosted a 2-day design charrette with a panel of 35 architects, engineers and local professionals to hammer out the rough outlines of a plan for making the building more efficient and sustainable.

3) Following the charrette, the Rocky Mountain Institute will develop a more detailed plan and framework for the government to work from as they renovate the building.

Our office’s director, Bill Brown, was invited to take part as a panelist in the 2-day event. Our office interns arrived in the second day to participate in the planning for LEED certification and to discuss the timelines and strategies for getting this project off the ground after the plan is completed.

Nathan Bower-Bir, our LEED specialist intern, speaks to the panel:
**Facebook**

Facebook is one of several social marketing websites that could be used to the benefit of IUOS. There are a huge variety of these sites, but others might include Smaller Indiana (business and regional focus) or MySpace (some inertia as a social marketing tool, with some advantages for media dissemination).

Facebook is attractive for several reasons, but one of the largest is its ubiquitous use by the student body at Indiana University. Since so many students use Facebook, if IUOS can reach out to even a portion of those users, there is a potential for massive exposure.

![Figure 4: IUOS on Facebook](image-url)
We created a group account for IUOS on Facebook, allowing us to invite students, faculty and staff to interact with us. Facebook users can also join our group without invitation if they see our profile through a friend’s group listing.

Some of the tools available on Facebook are a forum for discussions about IUOS or campus happenings, the ability to send messages to all group members, and a “Wall” to post messages on about the group (and to get replies from group members). The latter two functions could be especially helpful for getting the word out about campus events or volunteer activities, and as the IUOS group membership becomes larger, the impact of these tools is multiplied.

Finding ways to gain new members on the Facebook group would be a constructive task for future communications interns or staff at IUOS. The usage of the forum to promote discussion is also a promising tool that didn’t really take off this summer, despite a few attempts at conversation starters shortly after the group got off the ground.
Picasa

One of the additions to the IUOS toolset that seems to have been very successful, based on requests from media and repeated usage within the IUOS office, has been photo documentation of the Summer ‘09 Interns and their field trips within the context of the internship seminar. We utilized a free picture-sharing service called Picasa (Figure 5) to publish those photos online.

Picasa is part of the Google family of online software, and it allows for a good deal of free storage of pictures on Google’s servers. Users who search for photos on Google can find pictures in Picasa galleries that are appropriately tagged with the search terms. Users who are directed to IUSustain’s Picasa page from the IUOS Website can view a selection of photos from our field trips, or a series of promotional photos of our interns.

Picasa offers a valuable outlet for us, and allows us to give a face to the reports and research we are putting out. While this is a new tool for IUOS, it seems like one of the most useful and should definitely be continued. The photos for this first summer were taken with a point-and-click digital camera that can be purchased for under $300, and as technology advances it should be possible to get even better and more cost-effective photos to add to this collection. It also serves as a great resource when working with the media on press releases and articles, as they can pull photos directly from our site and select the best ones for their needs.
Figure 5: IUSustain on Picasa
Other Tools

There were a variety of other Web-based tools that we investigated or utilized to some degree this summer, but filled a smaller niche in our operation or weren’t fully operational by the end of the session.

Constant Contact and IU’s Listserv both have a specific use in the context of mass emails or newsletters from IUOS. We talked on a couple of occasions about the desire for a newsletter or online magazine type publication that would utilize Constant Contact, but this was not accomplished during the summer. The Indiana USGBC chapter newsletter was noted as a good example of a CC newsletter that may serve as a model for future IUOS publications. Constant Contact is a wonderful tool for graphics-heavy emails, but listserv has a somewhat simpler application and seems sufficient for emails of the event announcement or quick message type. It seems likely that both applications will remain in use for IUOS in the future.

Oncourse is an internal resource to IU that we only started utilizing with any depth near the end of the summer, but holds promise as a platform for information dissemination and storage within the IUOS community. It isn’t necessarily a great tool for outreach per se, but does a great job with a small group like the Advisory Board or the current group of interns.

YouTube is another resource that we only started to explore at the end of the summer. A video was produced for the summer symposium to highlight the work of our interns, and a YouTube channel seems like the best way to disseminate information of this kind. It is notable that IU also has a YouTube channel, so piggybacking onto their channel with a pre-existing viewer base might be a good idea. The production of video to show what IUOS is doing seems like a good resource to include in our repertoire, but the investment needed to produce good video may be higher than can be justified until the budget of the office is higher.
Finally, there was much discussion of a Sustainability Knowledge Base, following the pattern of the UITS Knowledge Base for computer help. The KB architecture would allow for the creation of a searchable encyclopedia of sustainability information, and seems like a very promising idea. Initial contacts with the UITS staff about using the KB structure seem promising, and there are several groups interested in helping out in some way, including the KB team at UITS and the Library Green Team. A resource that combines the sustainability knowledge of IUOS about both IUB and greater sustainability would be a massive addition to our operation, both in terms of usefulness and required input. It seems like a good investment though, if we consider the IU KB had over 15 million hits in 2008 and sustainability information is sorely in demand. IU and IUOS could become a leader in sustainability information with the creation of a tool with that kind of impact.
Strategic planning for communications

The future plan for communications must, above all, evolve to the current IUOS needs and the resources available to the office. There are some lessons that we may have learned over this summer that could apply to future efforts on the communications front.

There must be an evaluation of the primary duties of the intern/employee who is responsible for communications at the outset of the session, and an agreement from both the office and the employee about the expectations for the position. One of the complications for this summer was a lack of clarity early on about what the expectations and responsibilities for the intern were. Part of this confusion came down to a late decision to have the internship this summer.

Some suggested responsibilities for a communications and outreach intern:

- Updating and maintenance of the event calendar and news on the IUOS front page
- Sending out of press releases to the news outlets in a timely manner
- Regular updating of the blog (direct posts by the intern about the latest happenings in IUOS)
- Photographic records of all IUOS events and intern projects
- Maintaining the facebook and picasa pages
- Sending event notices through listserv
- Brainstorming new ideas for communications outlets for presentation to IUOS superiors

Obviously, there is some emphasis here on regular, consistent work, and yet a need to provide event coverage and to have quick turnaround on event emails and news releases. There may be good reason to seek out interns or employees who have a background in journalism in preference to some other fields. Hourly employees might also be a more cost-effective choice if a work-study position could be constructed and capable students could be recruited. There might also be an institutional advantage to hiring someone who could have a longer tenure (freshman or sophomore) so that the operation could gain some level of continuity.
Further on, as IUOS expands, it may be worth exploring a full-time employee to perform a wider range of duties for the office, including event coordination and town-gown relations (perhaps sitting on the Bloomington Commission on Sustainability to free up time for IUOS’ Director). Other units on campus utilize the services of communications officers to help keep the profile of their programs high and the information about their operations and goals accurate.

Finally there should be plenty of thought given to a notion of the directions of communication vis-a-vis sustainability at IU. Many of the tools that we are using now are primarily one-way in their communication, from IUOS to their audience, a direction that might be called top-down. One of the great advantages of the online revolution is that it increasingly enables information to flow the other direction, or even become circular. We talk a lot about closing the loop in sustainability, and one loop that isn’t being closed very well yet is the communications one.

In a sense, the Office of Sustainability is using communications to give people tools. These tools could be information to base future decisions or policy on, techniques for acting more sustainably, or links to other sustainability-oriented groups or businesses. This is a huge potential service that IUOS provides, but one thing that is missing is the kind of feedback about how these tools are being used, and maybe more importantly what these users have learned and how they made improvements with the information that came from us.

IUOS is missing out on opportunities to see their work in action, and to get valuable feedback on how we can make our techniques work better. It’s not clear what the best ways to close the loop are, but we have discussed open forums on the website, twitter feeds, Facebook forums, etc. The list of options is a long one. But it is important that we create the environment where real dialogue can happen. One-way communication, whether top-down or bottom-up isn’t the most effective way to move us ahead here.