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## **Fearless Feedback**

(5 May 00) OnlineOpinion gives your users a rant outlet and you, the perfect redesign tool

Jeff Sengstack

You beta tested, usability tested, and bug tested, and your site passed all with cheers of congratulations, but now that it's live, the emails keep coming in--complaints about the site's interface, the commerce, even the font size. Is there some way to harness your users' negative comments and let them know, before they've even given them, that you value their feedback and opinions? Yes, there is.

With no fanfare, explanation, or even captions, tiny, inconspicuous plus signs wrapped in parentheses have started popping up on dozens of Web sites. Usually tucked away in a corner, Web visitors can easily overlook them. However, despite their unobtrusive presence, tens of thousands of Web users have rolled their cursors over them and discovered a tiny pop-up Web site rating system.

Called OnlineOpinion ([www.opinionlab.com](http://www.opinionlab.com)), it lets customers readily rate a Web site on a page-by-page basis. Users may simply select a numeric rating for a page and move along or opt to drill down to a simple but more detailed opinion form, adding personal comments and snippets of marketing data if they so choose.

MVP.com, a sports e-tailer, has posted the little parenthetical pluses since the Super Bowl. The company receives more than 1,000 ratings and comments daily. "It gives us a competitive advantage," says MVP.com CTO Ian Drury. "It lets us act with great speed and act smartly."

Jackpot.com, a new Idealab advertiser-supported site, started using OnlineOpinion on April 20. Within ten days, they received 51,000 responses--more than 5,000 a day. "There's absolutely no doubt that it will drive an economic benefit for the company," says Jackpot.com's operations vice president Adam Zauder.

This simple but powerful tool is the brainchild of OpinionLab, a Chicago firm founded by Rand Nickerson, one of the developers of the Arbitron rating system. Nickerson has been at the forefront of opinion and audience data research for years. He discovered that traditional Internet user quality rating methods like pop-up surveys, feedback buttons, and email simply do not work. "Folks don't use them because they're unpredictable and idiosyncratic," Nickerson says. "They tend to be abusive rather than empowering."

## **Opinions are a real plus**

Many site surveys won't let respondents opt out, or they ask questions users aren't prepared to answer and probe for personal

and private information. Few are contextual, most are inconvenient and may take users to other sites, and some go on for pages and pages.

Nickerson designed OnlineOpinion to be convenient, quick, and easy. It protects privacy and is consistent. "It acts the same way every time. It never abuses you, never surprises you," says Nickerson.

Unlike services like Bizrate, PC Data Online, and Media Metrix, which provide aggregate volume numbers, OnlineOpinion tells site managers what people think of the site and how to make it better. "It gets down to the granular level, which is particularly actionable," says MVP's Drury.

Sites can download and install OnlineOpinion in about 10 minutes. Virtually everyone coming to a site can use it immediately. There is no client download. The (+) floats in the same client-selected location on all its Web pages. Rolling the cursor over the (+) symbol reveals a five-point rating scale. Optionally, clicking on "comments" lets users rate content, design, and usability, plus type in comments. An additional optional step is to register and submit some generic marketing information.

Surprisingly, users have not abused the (+) to maliciously "flame" sites. Nickerson thinks he knows why. Web users tend to settle into what he calls "personal Web space," groups of sites they rely on: "They have an interest in optimizing that space, and OnlineOpinion gives them a convenient means to alert sites to problems and suggest solutions."

Data are displayed on a clever and elegant spoke system. Each line represents a page; line length shows the relative number of opinions per page; and a color scheme differentiates positive, negative, and neutral response rates. The graphic highlights bimodal samples--widely divergent views--by placing a different colored dot at the end of a spoke. "Their spoke system is an enormously effective tool," says Jackpot's Zauder. "Most data analysis averages bimodal distributions into non-committal opinions, but these folks are very intelligent about how data can lie to you."

#### **Penny for your redesign thoughts**

The first detailed data analysis is free. Additional queries behind the spoke graphic cost \$850. For sites that do annual updates, that should suffice. Those that do more frequent revisions may choose to subscribe to an annual service for \$15,000. Still in beta is real-time data analysis that will regularly email new opinions and comments to site and page managers.

MVP already has used OnlineOpinion data to redesign its site and add new product lines. Originally MVP displayed products in lists. Click a product name and its image would appear. Customer feedback led to a redesign. Now, up to 16 images of products are displayed in a 4 x 4 matrix. "As a result, conversion has increased, which means revenues have increased, which is the name of the game," says MVP's Drury.

Jackpot.com had what they thought was a streamlined registration and client software download process. "What we learned through OnlineOpinion's feedback was that it was really cumbersome," says Jackpot's Zauder. So they pulled all the elements together onto one

page and added a clearer explanation of how the site works. "We've seen a very significant increase in the percentage of new site visitors who end up downloading the game."

This open channel between users and Web sites is the "beauty" of the Internet, according to Kent Allen, e-commerce analyst with the Aberdeen Group. Until now, most of that interaction took customers away from sites. He gives OnlineOpinion a "ringing endorsement." "It's an embedded means to taking advantage of that open channel," Allen says. "Finding out about a pissed-off customer is a hell of a lot cheaper than losing a pissed-off customer."

OpinionLab's CEO Rand Nickerson has big plans for his little (+) symbol. He sees a day when it, or something like it, becomes a feedback convention on the Web that will complement and even steer other rating techniques such as focus groups and usability testing. Both of those can be expensive but do sometimes provide "gems" that help justify their cost. Nickerson says that his little (+) will provide the same quality gems more frequently and for less money. <<

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