A Case Study of an Online Farmer’s Forum

Harvesting Helpfulness

THE FORUM

Existing work in online communities has focused on studying why lurkers lurk, rather than finding ways to support lurking behavior. We wanted to see what could be done to help lurkers lurk.

To that end, we partnered with the Rodale Institute, operators of one of the top online farming forums, newfarm.org (pictured above). The forum has been live since 2004 and currently has about 1,300 members.

ANALYSIS

We wanted to know whether the maps were producing more geographically clustered traffic. To find out, we analyzed the most active threads. Using the concept of a "distortion value" (the distance from each point to the center of the nearest cluster), we looked at each thread and calculated an average value per group. The circles on the map to the left represent each major cluster identified for Group B in the thread “Cultivating Tools.” The size of the circles corresponds to the distortion value for each cluster.

"PEACH TREE PROBLEM"

This thread’s Group A map is shown on the top, Group B in the bottom. The map displaying both viewers and posters of the thread reflects a much more tightly clustered viewership.

DESIGN A

Oats & Buckwheat
teff grass for ha
My crazy new ex
Use the newfarm phone!
Jang API Clean Seeder
Toolbar, work an
Cultivating tools [Goto page]
Roll-On Roll-Off

DESIGN B

Oats & Buckwheat
teff grass for ha
My crazy new ex
Use the newfarm phone!
Jang API Clean Seeder
Toolbar, work an
Cultivating tools [Goto page]
Roll-On Roll-Off

RESULTS

Does geographic information make forum posts more useful for non-participant viewers?

GROUP C

GROUP A

GROUP B

CLUSTERING

For the most active threads, Group B users tended to be far more strongly clustered than those in Groups A or C. In fact, Group B clusters were, on average, half the size of A or B clusters.

This implies that users’ viewing behavior was impacted only by knowledge of the location of posters.

SATISFACTION

We added a popup to collect satisfaction votes from viewers as they browsed the forum. Using it, we collected over 1000 votes. Positive votes accounted for 82% and 78% of all votes from Groups A and B, respectively, but were only 70% of Group C’s votes, a statistically significant drop-off.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the data indicated that viewing behavior was only affected when the maps showed the location of both viewers and posters. However, from interviews and further analysis, we learned that geographic location may not have been the best fit due to the forum’s content and traffic characteristics. Future work will explore the design of new navigational elements to more directly address these needs.

Stanford University HCI Group

Neil Patel, Steve Marmon, and Greg Schwartz