How and Why We Built GetVaccineAnswers.org

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Creativity & Innovation

Back in the fall, when the Ad Council started talking about the role we could play in educating the American public and building confidence around the COVID-19 vaccines , we knew our call to action would be to direct people toward the facts. But we weren't sure if we would need to build a standalone website or if we would simply refer people to a trusted source like the CDC.

For several reasons we'll explore below, we built our own educational site, GetVaccineAnswers.org, and we developed it in a much more agile and iterative way than we had ever worked before – with positive results. To date, more than 60% of survey respondents said they left the site feeling more confident about getting vaccinated.

Here's what we learned from our digital development journey.

First, we asked ourselves: Do we build a website?

We knew the CDC would be providing exhaustive, up-to-date information for Americans about the COVID-19 vaccines, and we were working closely with them to ensure our larger campaign creative was fully vetted from a public health perspective. But rather than driving traffic to their site, we decided to build our own.

We did this for a few reasons: We wanted to create a simple user experience with user-friendly language focused on the top questions people were asking, rather than driving people to an exhaustive resource that might overwhelm some people who just wanted straightforward answers to their questions. We initially identified these top questions based on the extensive research our insights team was doing as well as analyzing popular search queries.

We also wanted to visually extend the "It's Up to You" brand platform for our vaccine education initiative. We believed that having a branded site would increase engagement and create a more consistent user journey. We knew that the majority of site visitors would be coming from seeing our TV ads or branded display advertising, and that having the web experience look similar to these ads would create a sense of visual continuity. It also allowed us to share videos we created with healthcare providers including Dr. Anthony Fauci as part of our campaign.

Finally, we wanted to be able to track the performance of our campaign, both through Google analytics and with the help of several other analytics partners. This would have been more challenging if our creative had directed people to a government site.

We built iteratively, from minimum viable product to polished website.

While we are always looking to optimize our campaign sites, this was an exceptional case—we were developing a website connected to real-world events that were unfolding rapidly. We began developing the site in December, even before the vaccines were authorized for emergency use, so that we could be ready when they were.

We quietly launched our initial MVP in early January, before our partner agencies had fully developed the brand platform, so that we could test and validate the "question card" interface our digital partner, Viget, had designed with real users. We used our agile research platform, Feedback Loop, to test the site's architecture with users. And we validated our MVP with some changes, making it easy to layer on the visual branding in time for our larger campaign launch in early March.

Because we had built and tested the framework so early, we were in a position to respond to a constantly evolving situation. Since then, we have continued to optimize and add polish—rolling

out fixes, small changes and new features every two weeks.

At every step, we remained data (and stakeholder) informed.

Our approach to optimizing the site was primarily based on reviewing data from our audience research (including tracking misinformation), on-site analytics, and traffic patterns on a bi-weekly basis. We also continue to monitor different traffic sources and analyze their performance to help optimize our digital ads and our website content. Early on, the most common question people had was "How do I get vaccinated?" As vaccines became more available, we then saw a rise in questions about what getting vaccinated was like and how vaccines keep us safe. So we've created new content accordingly, at every step of the way.

Since visiting GetVaccineAnswers.org is the primary CTA for the entire campaign, we naturally received a lot of requests from internal stakeholders as the site evolved. Some of these requests proved highly impactful. Adding more photographs of real people to tell an emotional story around getting vaccinated helped humanize the site. And the request for an exit survey with a comment field proved to be a game changer—it really helped us measure how effective the site was for our users and gave us additional insights into our audience's questions, concerns and needs. Comments like "Thank you so much for providing this information in a clean, digestible way" and "It was detailed enough without it being a full science lesson, well done" have helped us continue to calibrate our messaging.

So what does this approach mean for other digital product builds?

The short answer is "it depends."

For our vaccine education initiative, it was important to launch early and use a sprint model to iterate since the issue was so urgent and playing out in real time.

It helped that we recognized the site as the core asset of this initiative, which meant we had a healthy budget to dedicate design and development for ongoing two-week sprints. Still, I believe these learnings will impact our approach to all future Ad Council websites. I hope they assist you with yours as well.

Photo credit: Viget

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Anastasia serves as SVP of the Ad Council's Digital Product Management group where she manages the team in charge of digital products for all Ad Council campaigns. She has worked in media for the past 20+ years and was one of the first graduates of the Medill School of Journalism's new media program at Northwestern University, where she earned an MSJ in 1999. Her first book about teens and technology called Totally Wired: What Teens & Tweens Are Really Doing Online was published by St. Martin's Press. She lives in Manhattan with her daughter and rescue hound.

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