

# NlightN Multimedia -

## A Real World View



### eCommunication: making it work

### Part 8 – Keeping it current

Briefing 6 was all about Relevance: eCommunication is only effective when it is relevant to the end user. So, why isn't all eCommunication relevant? Apart from the reasons given in Briefing 6, there's also the crucial issue of keeping the material up to date. An out of date communication is an irrelevant communication: in fact the only message that this sends is "this material is so unimportant they couldn't be bothered to keep it up to date".

Many developers faced with this situation remove time sensitive content from the communication to avoid the need to update. The effect of this is, ironically, to *decrease* relevance because it's often the time sensitive stuff that really matters!

So, how can the circle be squared? The problem's been that a myth has developed that keeping materials up to date is REALLY HARD( = really expensive!). Nothing could be further from the truth: eCommunication of all sorts that is developed with updating in mind can be kept up to date with the minimum of effort.



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Here's how to do it:

## 1) Design

Having said that you shouldn't strip out relevant content to reduce the need for updating, you should still, during the design and development phase, exercise common sense. For example, let's say you're developing an eLearning course for entrepreneurs and you're covering the VAT threshold (the limit below which VAT registration is optional).

In this case, it makes no sense whatsoever to have the voiceover artist speak the words "The current VAT threshold is £61,000 per annum." because recording a new voiceover simply because the threshold changes (as it does every year) is incredibly wasteful.

The answer would be to say "The current VAT threshold is shown here." and then fade in a text box containing the current figure. Nothing whatsoever is lost from the point of view of learning effectiveness, but the updating job has just been made much simpler.

Broadly speaking, the hardest medium to update is video, followed by sound, animation, graphics and text in that order. So, the more of this volatile material that can be presented as graphics or text **without compromising the product's effectiveness** the easier it will be to keep it up to date.

## 2. Deployment

The updating mechanism depends on whether you're delivering online or via CDROM. It's certainly much simpler to update an online product since all it takes is making the amendment and then uploading it. Products such as Macromedia Contribute make it simple for non-technical editors to change online content. In the case of Flash-generated content: the more of the content that your designers can keep external to the Flash file, the more you can amend yourself.

CDROM delivery is bit more tricky since the eCommunication either remains on the CDROM or is copied across to the user's PC during setup. If it's the latter, then it's relatively simple to create an updated version of the part of the program that has changed and have the user download it. In the case of the former, then you need to make sure that the program is very modular so that parts of it can run from the CDROM and parts from the user's hard disk.

In either case, you'll need an update mechanism such as TrueUpdate from IndigoRose which uses an internet connection to check for a newer version of

the eCommunication and then downloading and installing the change. We use this software regularly for CDROM-based products. This means that if something changes, all we do is make the change to the section in question and set it up as an update. Our menu uses an external index file which tells it that the updated section can be found on the user's hard disk rather than on the CDROM. It sounds complicated, but once the system has been set up, it's very simple to implement.

Another option for CDROM products is to have it pull information from the internet. In other words, in the case of the VAT threshold, you could create a small data file on your website containing this information and simply tell the CDROM where to pull it from. That address should never change, just the information it contains.

Out of date products can be dangerous and misleading: not only from the point of view of the incorrect information they contain but also to your credibility and the motivation of the people viewing your communication. The best technique is to include time-sensitive information where it is essential to the validity and relevance of the product but choose the easiest-to-update medium you possibly can (usually text or graphics) and set up a mechanism for ensuring that it stays up to date and that the user *knows* it is up to date! In the case of the VAT threshold, it should contain an indication of the year it refers to so that the user can be confident that it's still correct.