

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

If you're in business, a website is no longer optional

Around 1982, we installed a fax machine at the office. As two people lifted it into place, somebody said, "What good will that be?" That's the person who, two weeks later, was using the fax machine several times a day.

Before the early 1980s, fax machines were for big companies. Smaller companies needed a phone number and an address. Overnight, perceptions changed and any company that didn't offer a fax number was deemed not to be serious about business.

Today you're required to have an e-mail address. The next "must have" is a website. People expect you to have a one. It's where they'll look for your address, your phone number, and the hours you're open. They'll expect a map, driving directions, and a way to contact you.

Smart marketers know that a business is what people perceive it to be. If you're seen as a minor player, that's what you are. But today even minor players are expected to have a website.

Think, then do.

A website may improve your company's visibility, or it may be endless frustration. A website that's just thrown together gives visitors a negative message. If you can't commit to creating a website that enhances your business, then don't commit to a website at all.

Before you even register a domain name, know what you want your website to do. A website that offers products for sale will differ technologically from a site that is solely informational. When visitors want to contact you, will you have them click a link that opens their e-mail program or an information request form?

What happens to requests? How will you respond – and how quickly? People expect responses to be fast, if not immediate. Even on weekends and holidays you should reply to any request in 24 hours or less. You may want to consider an "autoresponder" that provides an immediate response with a promise of more information to come.

Your website should properly represent your company's image and philosophy. A site created for a medical practice would be inappropriate for a grunge band. And vice versa! What will your visitors expect?

What about the size of your website? Will everything fit in 3 pages, 30 pages, or 300 pages? Larger sites need more

planning to avoid the expense of fixing problems that may appear on hundreds of pages.

Consider where the website will "live" – on a server in your office or on a shared machine at a data center? Except for giant companies with IT departments, renting space is almost always better because the cost will be lower and the service will be more reliable.

Who will maintain your website and how often will it be updated? An informational site for a small business may need freshening only a few times a year. Even so, the presence of outdated information – announcing a September sale in March of the following year, for example – kills credibility.

Examine competitors' sites and those in other business sectors. An idea you see on a consumer website might adapt well to use on your business site.

Once you've sorted out the details, register the domain name. Short names (Ebay.com) are easy to remember, but longer names can work, too. One good example of a longer name is PowerDirectMarketing.com.

If you'll be renting space at a data center, find a reliable provider. Most domain registrars offer hosting, but companies that do nothing but hosting usually provide a richer selection of options. Avoid hosts that want you to pay for a year in advance. Expect to pay \$5 to \$100 per month for hosting.

You can do as much of your own website development as you're comfortable with, but remember that the website may be a prospective client's introduction to you. The site should look professional; spelling and grammar must be flawless. Website designers offer advice, structural design, graphic design, writing, and editing services. The best designers ask enough questions to understand your needs and then translate those needs into code on the website.

Essential components.

Some information belongs on every website. Your contact information (address, phone, fax, and e-mail) should be on every single page. Make it easy for anyone who wants to write, phone, fax, or send you an e-mail. Failing to do this is one of the most common of website annoyances.

You may also want to add a company history, company policies, downloadable reports or forms, frequently asked questions, hours of operation, a map and directions to your office, your mission statement, newsletters, phone numbers for individuals or departments, press releases and contact

information for the news media, prices, references, a site map, special pages for clients (login required), your strategic plan, and so on.

A longer version of this article, complete with a checklist of things to consider, is at www.blinn.com/checklist.html.

Friends in the Internet age

In the early days of the Internet's availability outside the lab, it was hailed as the savior of life as we know it. Then it was condemned as inherently evil. The truth is, of course, somewhere in the middle. A death in Toronto and an on-line discussion of the man who died reminded me once again that it's possible for people to be friends, even if they've never met.

For 10 years or so, I've been involved with an on-line discussion list that's ostensibly for copyeditors. In fact, it has attracted an eclectic group of followers from all over the world.

David Ibbetson, one the group's regulars and a British expatriate who has lived in Toronto for many decades, had been hospitalized for several weeks after falling one evening at home. On March 23rd, he died.

The list learned of his death on Monday. Given his age and particularly his physical condition, the news was not a surprise.

A virtual wake

Within minutes, a virtual wake had materialized. Memories poured in from the United States and Canada, of course, but also from England, Israel, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Norway

During his illness, list members in Toronto visited with him. Those too far to visit sent cards. Some even tried to arrange for delivery of a notebook computer to his hospice -- an attempt that the patient refused politely but sternly.

For all the dangers the Internet brings, and there are plenty of those, it can also bring a real sense of community. Some of us had met the man who died. Many knew him only by his words -- the words seen on screens far from Toronto.

A month earlier, a list member's daughter had collapsed and died during a sporting event at college. The list members made donations to a scholarship fund in her memory.

When list members travel, they often mention it on the list and the result is usually a meeting for lunch or dinner with a few of the local members.

In some ways, the Internet has become the "front porch" of the world, a place where we sit and talk with our neighbors as they walk by. If we are ever to live peacefully with one another, it will be by developing a sense of community around the globe and the Internet can surely help with that.

Bill Beesting, the assistant dean of undergraduate studies at Florida International University in Miami, wrote a thoughtful commentary about this topic following David ("The Ib") Ibbetson's death. I think it's worth sharing and I have received Bill's permission to do so.

His words are in the column at the right.

Death on the Internet

By BILL BEESTING

I have been reluctant to comment on the death of the Ib, mostly because I sat here reading the memories of others and was foundering. It brought back, also, my first experience with hearing of the death of one whom I had known only electronically. Those of you who subscribed back in 2001 will remember Jim Chilton and how his lovely granddaughter informed us of his death. Jim was enjoying life. He had a new Cadillac STS and a pair of DKNY sunglasses that he felt really cool in. I pictured him like that as I cried, telling my wife how stupid I felt crying for someone I had never met. But then, I thought, I had met him. Just in a different way. And I liked him. And I was sad to see him go. Crying was okay.

I liked David too. While contemplating his death and why I again felt loss, I also thought of what the Internet brought to David. Without it, none of us would have heard of him, but it allowed him something to do as he lay awake nights unable to sleep. He was able to share what he knew, to not let that breadth of knowledge linger unexpressed inside his head. He used us and liked us as much as we used and liked him. I picture him snickering a bit, thinking that this technology that happened late in his life sure was a lot of fun.

I know what some of you are like simply from the way you express yourselves in your messages to the list; others I know more about from private messages. I have met a few in person. I'd love to meet many more. I often see from asides the wonderful, diverse experiences of those on the CE-L. I want to delve into those experiences, find out more. I know, though, that in the coming years, I may log on one morning and find the name of another acquaintance in the subject line. I will regret not knowing him or her better, and I will be saddened. And that's okay. Being missed is the best thing to leave behind.

CORNER *on the market* by A.J. Stinnett

"The incessant use of e-mail and cell phones by managers are symptoms of poor planning, micro-managing, and lack of trust of subordinates."