Exploring The Internet

Tips for a top web site

Today's web sites are where desktop publishing was in the mid-80s – just because you *could* add 14 type faces to a page, some people *did.* It was a few years before typographers and designers migrated to the new medium, bringing decades of accumulated wisdom on effective communication techniques. (Hint: maximizing the number of typefaces on a page is *not* one of those effective techniques.)

The Web is in a similar spot today. Adobe, Claris and Microsoft have software that will magically transform your word processed document into a web page (of sorts).Hardware is not that expensive either.

How can you make sure that your site reaches as many potential customers as possible? And does so in a way that is in concert with existing Net culture? Here are some pointers from two years of online dues-paying experience:

1. The Site Has A Purpose
Plan, plan, plan! Who is the audience? What kinds of information might they like? What kind of site structure is most applicable? What are the site goals? How does the site integrate with other marketing, public relations, employee relations, community relations, stockholder relations, etc. programs? What outside resources should be linked? Then make certain that these answers are apparent to someone unfamiliar with your company or site! PS: plan for an evaluation program, too.

2. Simple Remains Best
Think like a user. Are most of the site visitors using a 14.4 or 28.8 modem? Then keep graphics to a minimum and make certain they communi-

cate something! Recognize that if your site is "optimized" for the latest versions of Netscape or Internet Explorer ... you've just announced to the world, "only cool geeks welcome here!" For some technology sites, this might be great positioning. For government sites and public affairs oriented sites ... this is the kiss of death.

3. Use Good HTML
Auto-convert programs don't. Create good HTML, that is. They are fine for first-draft, but hire a seasoned pro (or spend a lot of time surfing and examining code) to make certain the site conforms to HTML standard. And Net norms. For example, you want to use graphics to navigate the site. Provide text navigation alternatives! Then when someone visits your site and is not automatically downloading graphics, or someone visits your site using a non-graphical software program, or someone who is blind visits, those people will be able to navigate your site. And find the information you've provided for them.

4. Answer Your e-mail!
The corollary is, make certain there are e-mail addresses in obvious places. Then, answer the posts. Quickly. And with more than a form letter.

5. Keep Info Current
Nothing turns off a Net vet more than visiting a site that hasn't been updated in 8 months. Except, of course, sites that don't date their pages or documents, so there is no way to determine currency. Keep the site up-to-date. This is the largest ongoing expense associated with a site. Not the hardware. Go back to Tip One. Plan, plan, plan!

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