

WEBSITES: HOW WE'VE GROWN!

Massive global presence, massive growth

Sometime in 2005 the one-billionth Internet user went online. It took 36 years to get to that figure, but many commentators predict the second billion within another ten years.

Statistics can produce some freaky findings. There are roughly 6.5 billion people alive today on Planet Earth, of which around 4.4 billion are popularly classified as literate.

So nearly a quarter of all the people in the world with the required literacy skills have accessed the Internet already – far more, we may suppose, than those who have easy access to good standards of healthcare or education. (The Internet will almost certainly play an increasingly pivotal role in the way we educate ourselves in future. And, of course, in the ways we look after ourselves).

Since growth in Internet usage over the next ten years (18% per year globally is a popular current forecast) will vastly to outstrip growth in the global headcount, we may expect the overall proportion of users to rise further.

Corporate websites: continual change

Corporate websites are much younger than the web – a little over ten years. The explosive growth in the number of such sites, which in the West is in fact now slowing down, is more than matched by the extraordinary speed at which they have become more effective in engaging their visitors.

Visit the Wayback Machine (<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>). Look at how any popular site of today looked in 1998 – the year Diana died, Dolly the Sheep was born and Mike Tyson developed a rather-too-public taste for his opponents' ears. In other words, yesterday. Chances are, if it was around then, it will have changed out of recognition.

It's easy to see these changes only in terms of developments in underlying web technologies and refinements: the visual design, the number of pages, the degree of interaction now possible with the visitor, and stop there.

But it's what they all do when properly brought together – the raw communications power they then unleash – which is the most amazing.

Good company websites today have an extraordinary ability to reach out, to inform and to engage, with every possible stakeholder group. And increasingly, to do it more cost-effectively than any other medium.

We've only just started

And yet, even among the best sites, there's a sense we're still in the Stone Age. Bandwidths will continue to increase, providing progressively faster page loading. Wireless coverage will become more accessible in more places. Screens will become slimmer, more portable, and their images better defined.

Advances in search technologies will enable required content to be presented more exactly, more quickly, more intuitively, and much, much more thoroughly, than ever before, and through video and film footage as well as the written word.

Equally important, through more sophisticated user testing, and a wider creative approach to website build, company websites will develop the capacity to engage at a more visceral level all those groupings who need 'feel' as well as information. Obvious immediate candidates here are potential employees and retail customers, but the field is undoubtedly much wider than this.

As these things start to kick in, a virtuous circle will develop. The site's value to the bottom line will become more obvious. This will stimulate new investment in the site, which in turn will encourage further development.

In short, what looks great today will, when viewed in a few years on the Wayback Machine, look one dimensional, cold and stiff.

All this is to come. We do indeed live in exciting times.

But not all that glisters is gold. There's another side to all this, too, for organisations wishing to improve their sites. Interested? Take a look at *Away from the cutting edge* available to download from the "Food for thought" page on the same page as this article (www.bagnoldshorter.co.uk/h/food-for-thought_2.html).