Unraveling the web

Internet pros offer helpful tips on how to make sure your company's website is a winner.

By Cindy Svec and John Lock

No doubt about it, the Internet has changed business forever, including the brick-and-mortar world of the shopping center industry. This new economy brings both opportunities and challenges. Building and maintaining a strong presence on the web, for example, can be a daunting task. Not only do you need excellent design and graphics, but you also need specialized technical talent. And no matter how much you spend on your Internet strategy, a host of apparently small details can mean the difference between a winning site and a dud. Below are some obvious (and not so obvious) techniques that are often overlooked during website development.

Consistent identity

Your website should be an extension of your traditional marketing efforts. It's easy to get creative with cool effects and technologies in the new digital environment. However, if your corporate look has always been "Brooks Brothers" and your website shouts "Nike," visitors will wonder if they came to the right place. Use your print material as a design starting-point and consider changes carefully. A savvy web designer will use the new medium to reinforce your corporate identity, not invent a new one.

Common sense design

A website is not unlike a shopping center. It should have clear entrances and exits. Users should be able to find their way around without confusion. As with signage at a mall, your site's
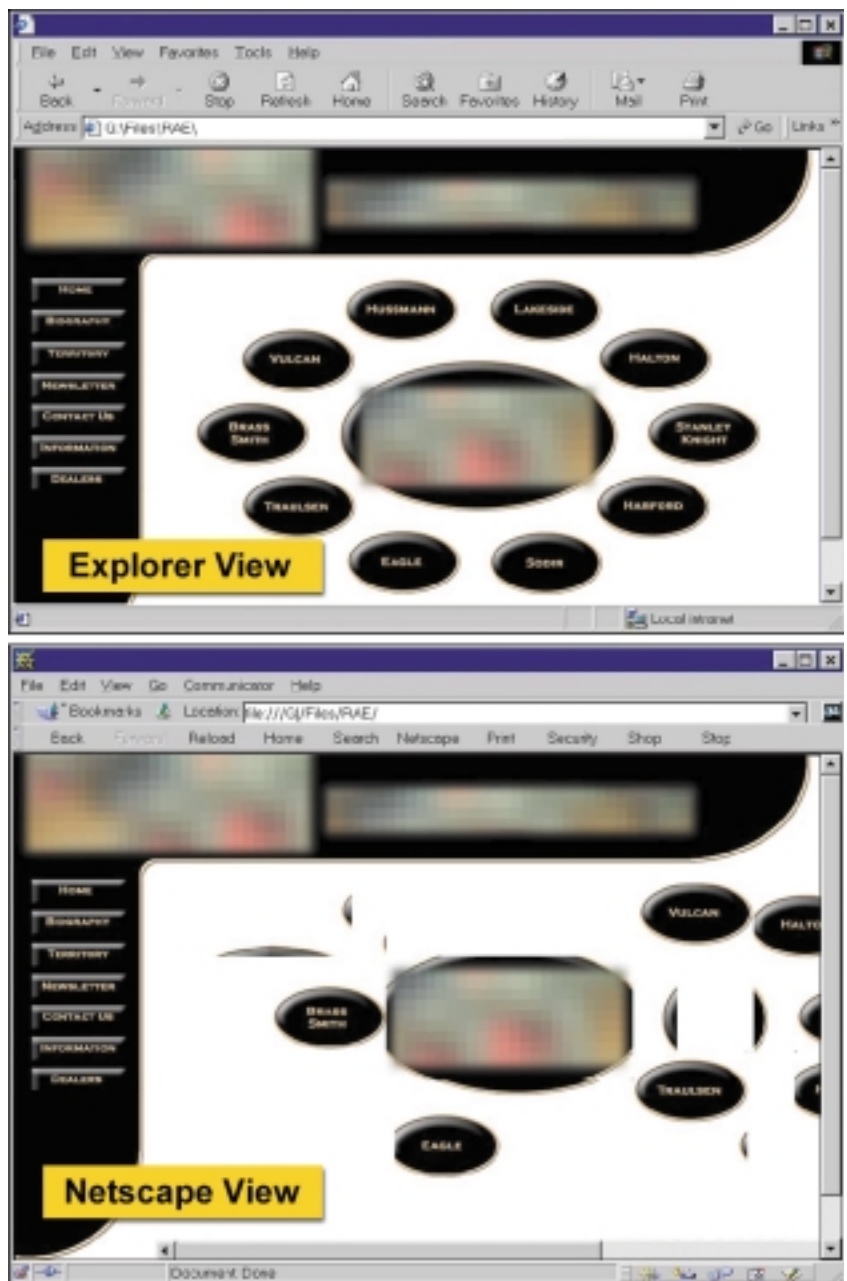
How a web page appears on an Internet surfer's screen often depends on the browser being used. Some designers create sites that look great in one browser but awful in another.

navigation tools should be prominent and easy-to-read. And you must accommodate casual browsers as well as task-oriented visitors.

Review your own site and use the shopping center analogy to see if you are baffling your viewers, rather than aiding their search for information. Recruit volunteer "testers" from outside your industry to view your site and gather their feedback. You may be surprised at the results.

Avoid giving your viewers too many choices at once. Good website architecture presents seven or eight major navigational choices at most. User interface studies show presenting more choices promotes confusion in viewers' minds as they try to figure out where to go next. Organize information so it can be presented in logical sections that users can "drill down" into rather than trying to present everything at once. This process is called making your website "deeper" as opposed to "flatter."

A major consideration for most designers is the way people connect to the Internet. A lucky few have high-speed connections such as DSL, cable (also called Broadband), or fiber-optic. But the vast majority of users (more than 90%) still connect using standard telephone lines. This means site designers would be wise to develop pages using graphics intelligently to avoid long download times.

Statistics show most users will wait up to 15 seconds for information to be displayed. After that the numbers drop off steeply and users start leaving in droves. Recruit your volunteer testers again to gauge the performance of your site, but base any changes on the average tester response. Also remember, there are many factors besides the design of your site that can affect performance, such as server load, network load and individual PC performance.

Once you've got people viewing your site, keep them coming back with solid content. Viewer polls indicate the most important thing to
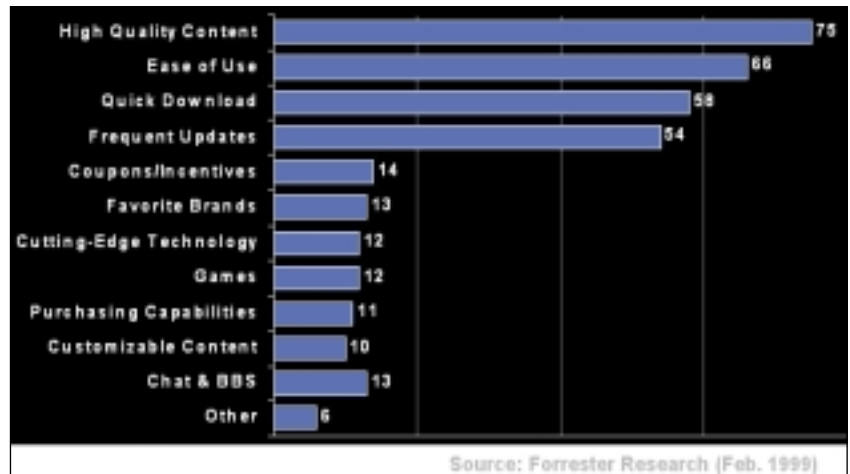
Viewer polls indicate that web users value strong content more than anything else.

most web users is content. People crave information and they want to find it quickly and easily on your site. Forget the cool tools and flashy graphics. Concentrate on good writing and provide lots of information for online viewing, downloading to view later or printing for offline viewing. And keep information fresh and up to date. Users respond favorably to websites that appear active and frequently maintained.

Technology issues

"Technology should be transparent to the user" should be the first law of website development. With so many new tools available, you might want to use the very latest on your site. But this can be a Faustian bargain and you might regret that decision later. For example, many developers have tried using Frames technology to build websites. Frames allow multiple small web pages to be displayed simultaneously within your browser window. Sounds like a great idea, but it was not implemented well by browser manufacturers. Many professional developers now avoid Frames as a basic website architecture because of unpleasant side-effects such as poor print support, problems with search engines, confusing bookmarks and difficulties managing navigation.

It's always a bad idea to depend on certain technologies being present in

the viewer's computer to run critical functions of your site. One common mistake is to use technology such as Macromedia's Flash or Sun's Java language to handle your site's navigation. While this can provide a spiffy presentation for some users, those without these tools (or old and broken versions) will be unable to use your website at all. Save the fireworks display so that all users can move around your site and get information.

Browser wars

Microsoft (Internet Explorer) and Netscape (Communicator or Navigator) are the two major competitors producing the browser software most of us use to view websites. This intense competition has led to each manufacturer diverging in their interpretation of how web pages should be assembled and displayed. As a result, many website owners are surprised to find their electronic brochures won't display in one browser, even though they look fine in the other!

With millions of users (and your potential customers) using products from both Microsoft and Netscape, it is foolish to neglect viewing your website in both browsers. Both are available to download for free from the web and every website owner should be comparing their site in both browsers to make sure there are no surprises.

User settings

To make matters even more complicated, users themselves can change the environment to the point that your carefully crafted website becomes unusable! For example, many people increase the default font size to make pages easier to read. If your web developer doesn't keep this in mind, you could end up with text and buttons that are unreachable –even totally invisible –at larger font sizes. This is particularly evident when using Frames technology.

Statistics show the majority of web users are using a screen resolution of 800x600 pixels. This should be your design target, but don't alienate those that are running smaller (640x480) or larger (1024x768+) screen resolutions. Many users may have up-to-date equipment that is not configured for optimum viewing.

Non-technical people care very little how their computers are set up, just as long as they work. These are often the decision-makers you are trying to reach, so don't neglect them. Your website should scale easily up or down in size without introducing visual defects or navigation problems. You can test this easily yourself by temporarily changing your screen resolution to one of the above sizes. You'll find these values under "Display" or "Monitor" settings.

Also remember users can stretch their browser windows into just about any rectangular shape you can think of. What does your site look like in a tall, narrow window? How about a short, wide one? Here again, website developers must keep these factors in mind to avoid ugly surprises later.
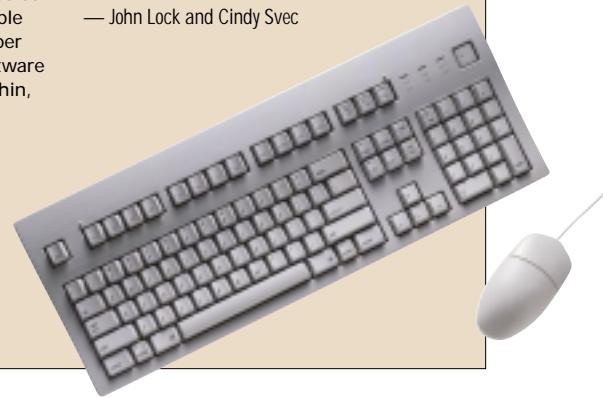
Search engines

Most website owners will spend more time and money promoting their websites than they did building them. People have to be able to find your website or it's as useful as last year's fruitcake. Besides listing all the keywords and phrases you might need

More tips from the pros

- **Add contact information.**
  Don't forget to add your contact information on every web page at your site: name, address, phone number, fax and e-mail. People often print web pages for later review.

- **Add URL to all marketing materials.**
  Include your website address on all of your traditional marketing collateral: business cards, letterhead, brochures, signage, voicemail messages, wherever you would use your phone number.

- **Don't use "hit counters."**
  Leave the "hit counters" off your website. It's embarrassing to show the world that 12 people have looked at your site since 1998. And most people simply don't care. Ask your developer or web host for a web statistics software package, such as WebTrends or Urchin, to monitor your traffic.

- **Design for speed.**
  Users with slower connections or computers will thank you for it. Users with faster connections will be amazed at your site performance.

- **Avoid "techno-clutter."**
  This is the tendency to use animated, spinning or blinking graphics to attract attention. They'll attract attention all right – the wrong kind! Most people see these devices as annoying distractions or a sign that somebody has way too much spare time.

- **Review your site frequently.**
  Even when nothing much has changed, re-word various sections to maintain a fresh appearance. Viewers are much more attracted to a website that looks current. In addition, you're more likely to catch problems that may have been overlooked before.
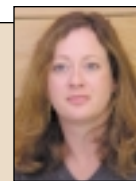
— John Lock and Cindy Svec

in your web pages, you have to be situated in the right location (another parallel with shopping centers).

That means your site must be listed in the major search engines in order for people to find it easily. Search engine placement and promotion has become a thriving industry in itself. However many of the techniques are easily learned and performed by any website owner. One of the best resources available is the Search Engine Watch at http://www.searchenginewatch.com/. This website publishes a great deal of free advice and resources to help people improve their performance in the search engines. Beyond that, you can subscribe for a small annual fee to get access to even more detailed How-To articles and tips to promote your site effectively.

Another way to improve your "location" is to make sure your site gets listed in all the industry-specific directories that have sprung up around the web. You're probably familiar with names such as LoopNet, StoreTrax, PikeNet and others. Many of these services are free, but even the paid listing sites are well worth the expense because they deliver a highly-targeted user base. People searching these sites are already looking for what you have to offer, so there are no casual browsers! A little research through Yahoo.com's "Commercial Properties" section will turn up many of these services. ◆

Based in McDonough, Ga., **Relevant Arts** is a graphic design and Internet development company with clients in the shopping center industry (www.relevantarts.com).

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