

# Le Bon Journal

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Volume 1 Issue 7: Building a Web site, rediscovering yourself

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**B**uilding your personal Web site is like rediscovering yourself. It is a very rewarding experience as you think about what you're going to put on there, identify what's important to you, and arrange or design it accordingly.

## Web sites

Many people have asked me for advice about doing their own Web site. Where should they begin?

I've run into several people who got "locked in" - into a Web host because it was affordable. But once they see the resulting five page Web site, they find spelling mistakes or they want more functionality. Yet, they don't realise that, what they paid for - only entitled them to the quickest and simplest job. That bargain does not include a customised follow-up service, i.e. customer satisfaction. By taking such bargains, they are giving the signal "I can't afford more." But by chasing after the Web host or Web designer (usually the designer is the host for such "bargains"), they are giving the signal that "I'm a high maintenance customer."

There are so many things that Web designers/hosts don't tell you. Most people (companies) who don't have a Web site - think they need one because their competitors have one. Nowadays it becomes as essential as a business card, an entry in the phone book, etc. Yet, many people are fooled by the appearance of a Web site. You can't judge a book by its cover.

I'm hoping to demonstrate, with my Website, the importance of content. Also, it's not good enough having a fantastic Web site, when no one can find you. It's no use having a good-looking Web site when it's slow to load or looks distorted on some browsers and PC's.

## Users and usability

There are three types of information seekers: value-focussed, alternative

driven, and a hybrid. In a recent article (Computer Weekly, 9 November 2000), the usability guru Jakob Nielsen believes there are two types of users: those who vaguely know what they want and those who know exactly what they want.

Search engines are good for those who know what they want. They can use keyword search and more advanced search strategies. But those who don't know what they want will be overwhelmed by the number of search results.

This is precisely the reason why good navigation is important. It should be intuitive. It should be easy to move around logically. When a user visits a Web site for the first time, he/she would want to know what it is, if it's not obvious. Thus an "about us" link is very important. For company sites, it's good to have its collection of press releases or "in-the-news".

The Internet offers instant gratification. Users who have to wait for components to download will move on. Only those who know what they're looking for and know that the particular site has got it will be willing to wait for the slow download.

## Linkrot: links that don't work

Broken links, broken hearts. It takes only a few broken links to drive an impatient visitor away. It takes only a few broken hearts to abandon hopes of love forever. Broken links send the message that the site is not updated on a regular basis. No one running the show, and in the worst case, loss of credibility.

So how do you prevent broken links?

Don't have any links at all

Check your links systematically: manually, via an automatic link checker tool, or outsource this

Rely on visitors to report broken links

EContent (Oct/Nov 2000) reported that at least 5 to 10% of all links on

the World Wide Web are broken. The usability guru Jakob Nielsen wrote "Even worse, linkrot contributes to dissolving the very fabric of the Web: there is a looming danger that the Web will stop being an interconnected universal hypertext and turn into a set of isolated info-islands."

Is linkrot equivalent to incorrect citations? Let's investigate when a broken link occurs. An incorrect link is an incorrect citation, that is, incorrectly specified. This can happen if you've specified links with www instead of http://www or when if you've mistyped or misspelled. However, when the page itself moves or disappears, which sometimes happen, all the links to it are broken. A meta-tag refresh page to redirect the previous page to a new one would have resolved the broken link.

The good news is that there are many software out there that will check your links for you. There are even free link checkers that you can submit your page to. They will email you back with a diagnosis of your linkrot.

## Image lessons

"A picture's worth a thousand words" and images on the Web certainly convey a lot. But Web images do not always load quickly or fit the screen perfectly.

I learned some new things while putting together a photo page.

Images are quick to load if they are either

a- small in size (dimensions)

or

b- small in file size

The rule of thumb I use is file size no greater than 50k. The trade-off between dimensions and file size is quality of resolution.

Background images can be big - but resolution poor - to compensate for the file size.

Because images load more slowly than text, it's useful to have an "alt" tag which appears first. Some people switch off their images - so only the alt text shows up.

There's also a "title" tag that you can use to describe what the image is about.

Border="0" is important if you link the image to something else - otherwise you get a blue border around it.

While it's not necessary to specify width and height of the image, the image loads better if you do.

### **Test your personal Web site**

How good is your Web site? How many visitors return for the second and third time? What stops people from returning? Your Web site is "sticky" if the visitors return again and again. How do you create stickiness? How do you build loyalty? How do you win commitment?

Start with people that are already committed to you. Your partner. Your family. Your extended family. Your neighbours. Your colleagues. Your friends. Your high school teachers. Your classmates. These people know you and naturally would be interested in anything you produce. You can share experiences, memories, Web tips, useful bookmarks, and news. Those people with the most vested interest in you are the ones closest to you. They will take the time to visit your site and provide feedback.

People who build Web sites for themselves are susceptible of ethnocentrism, defined as "the mental habit of viewing the world solely from the perspective of one's own culture." Although you may be building your site to attract visitors with similar interests, not everyone will visit your site with the same purpose. You may think that people come to your site to appreciate your original music. People may be lured by your music but return for your links, your writing, or anything else you may offer that you did not think was attractive. Not everyone has the

same computer set-up as you. Not everybody surfs the Web as you do or as you would expect. Not everyone has the same attention span.

Web surfers are very fickle. If something doesn't work the first time, they are unlikely to return. In general, people don't stick around. In these days of information overload, your job is to attract them in the first place, hold their attention long enough to make them want to return and tell other people about your site.

Test your site with people you know. If you share the same physical space, show them your site. Watch them navigate. See their reaction. Get their feedback. Some things that are self-evident to you may not appear so to others. Similarly, if it takes five clicks to find something, then you must redo your navigation. Catch the moment they lose interest. My colleague lost interest when his speaker configuration didn't allow him to play my music. Another business associate lost interest when his video configuration did not allow him to see the images on my Web site. My sister doesn't visit as often as she would like because her modem connection is too slow.

People stop visiting your site if there is an impediment, whether caused by you or not. You can test for broken links, missing images, sub-optimal images, non-Web-compatible colours, etc. For a large site, you need to rely on your trusted and loyal visitors to inform you of such problems. If you just throw your Web site out there, i.e. by submitting to search engines and directories or by advertising, you may not get anyone to give you the critical feedback you need. This is why it's important to first get people who have a vested interest in you or your Web site to test and provide that indispensable feedback.

### **Promoting your Web site**

Surfing the Web is a journey. Cyberspace is a huge place. We often end up not where we intend to be at all. It may take us to some wonderful places we would never

discover should we follow a guidebook. Many of us, I'm sure, have looked for a particular restaurant only to find it full or closed upon arriving. By chance, the one next door was new, not listed in the directory, and open for the evening. Had we not gone to the first restaurant, we would have missed out on this one altogether. Similarly, the top-ranked site from a particular search may not be the one we want, but one of its links may lead us to a new heaven.

Apply the common sense of your daily presence to your Web presence. Make yourself easy to be found. Locate your Web site next to a well-known one. Some people register domain names that sound like something famous or familiar. Make your Web site address easy to remember. Like going to a cocktail party, it is much easier to remember a name that is fitting to the person. For instance, I named my Web site analyticalQ after myself. Anne Ku is an-alytical Q (ku) because I think I am analytical.

Promote your site in all sorts of ways to allow visitors to get to your site in all sorts of ways.



**Anne Ku**

### **Editor's note:**

Once you start building your own Web site, you join the cyberspace community of webmasters, who will be more than happy to help you.

### **Feedback from readers:**

*London: I spent nearly an hour surfing your most interesting Website, for its deeply felt humanity, breadth of subjects and a lot of practical information.*

*Texas: By the way, a friend of mine in Illinois that I lost contact with 10 years ago found me by your Website! Actually, her husband found my email address posted to your Website. Isn't that wild?*

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