

Planes, trains and snowmobiles

Web-based technology has come so far and yet not nearly far enough

By Lynda Rathbone

It's 2008 and websites and web-based technologies have been around for about 15 years now. Fifteen years! Where did the time go? Have I really been thinking about what makes a good, usable website for all this time?

They say time flies when you're having fun but I'm still kind of waiting for that to happen. I'm waiting for the day when bandwidth is the speed it says on the package and online access is ubiquitous. I'm tired of dealing with dongles and network cards and wifi passwords as I carry my laptop around the world.

I am one of those geeks who wants to have an implant in my arm with my medical records, bank details and identification information so I can just wave my arm and presto – I'm authenticated or approved or let into the country or whatever.

cyberspace, it's still amazing to me that a lot of organisations simply aren't up to scratch.

Take for instance the simple URL. I remember the time back in, say, 1995 or so when I dreamed of a world where the website address was on every package, product and TV or magazine advertisement out there. Wouldn't it be great, I thought, if they just added that on like they do their snail mail addresses or phone numbers so target audiences could look online for more information and be immersed in usable content goodness all around them?

And alas! Gradually this started happening until now it's seems odd when you can't find the URL. Some companies don't even offer the phone number anymore (don't get me started – that's another column altogether!). You want to vote by text for Big Brother, for instance? The TV ad contains the

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But sadly, I know I'll have to wait. In fact, I still can't find a bank account that will let me access my US and UK details as one account online (or off, for that matter). Come on IT people of the banking industry – *please* sort this out.

But aside from minor inconveniences and the fact I'm a bit squeamish about the implant thing, the real mystery to me is how we have come so far with web technologies, yet are still so far behind when it comes to the user's online experience.

By now, shouldn't most websites be easy to navigate, have a search engine that works with about 70 per cent accuracy and offer content that is formatted for consumption online and positioned for the user on the site? Shouldn't I be out of business? I feel like a lot of us out there have been banging the user experience drum for so long now that surely most people have got the memo, right?

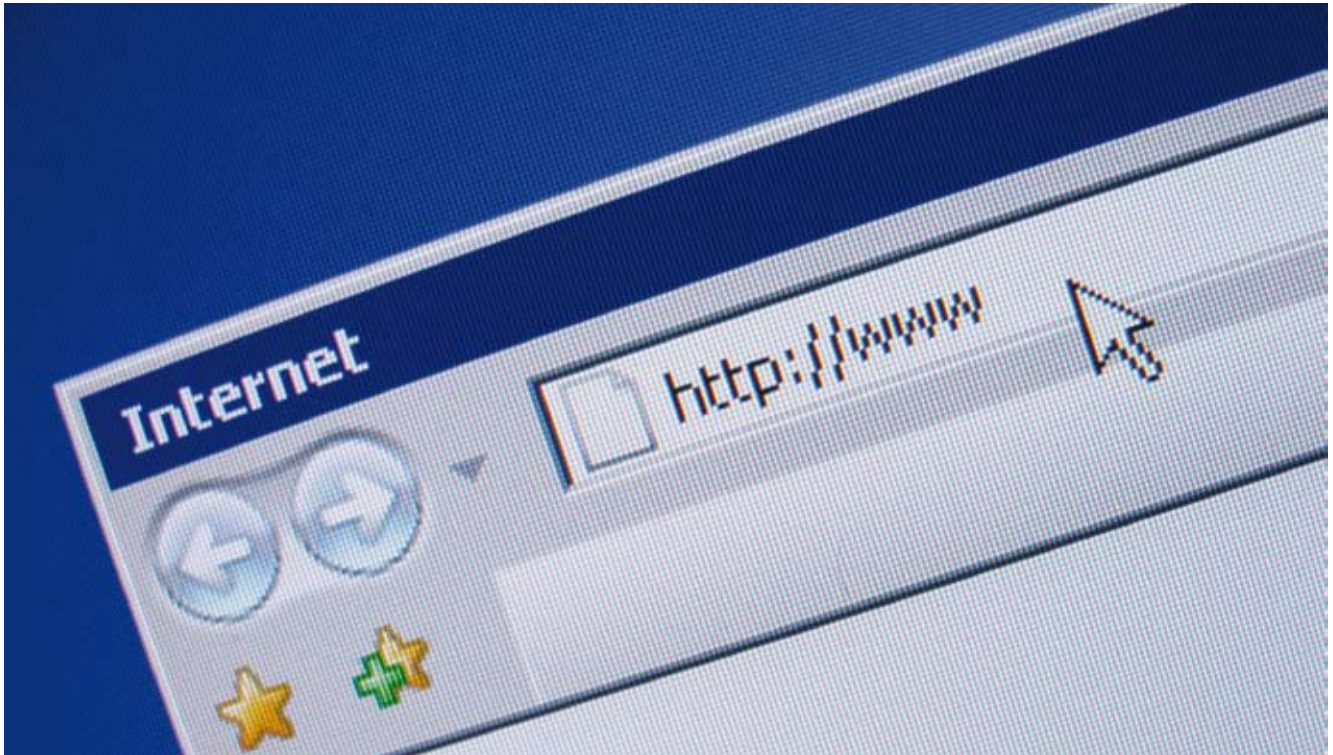
Well, sort of. Things have certainly improved since the days of the grey background and groundbreaking blink tag, but despite the fact that what makes a website usable hasn't really changed that much since they started popping up in

numbers to text/call into and then the website address for terms and conditions, e-mail addresses, competitions, blogs, etc. Great! You want to know how to stop smoking? Easy. Just look up the government website, advertised at the end of the ad or in the GP's office and brochure. Everything these days directs you to the website.

But that's where my dream ends. Think of the millions of pounds, euros, yens and dollars spent each year on getting the user to the site. The ads, the mobile campaigns, the posters, the printed materials, the packaging!

As an advertising agency employee recently said to me, she feels the campaign has been successful if she can get the audience to the site. But to me this flies in the face of logic. How can a campaign be successful if the users get to the site but the site doesn't support those user journeys?

They'll land on the home page and simply get frustrated that they don't see anything familiar from their offline signposts and leave. This applies to keywords as well. What's the point in buying a keyword that only directs a user to a site where that word seems disconnected from what they are offering? This isn't helping; it's frustrating! And that's not very successful if you ask me.



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There are great sales opportunities lost, user data not captured and brand equity eroding as I type just because someone spent 95 per cent of the budget on the TV and print, leaving the site as nothing more than a destination URL and not a true user journey.

So the next time you think about doing a major campaign or product launch where your website URL is the destination, think about how that user will travel down your path. To them, it's one journey even though they may take a train, a plane and a snowmobile to get there, so to speak. Setting up your website to support this is critical. Their journey should at least be:

- *Recognisable*: they'll be looking for a continuation of what they saw elsewhere – branded: online and offline brands should be aligned;
- *Direct*: people want to be told what to do when they arrive. Please leave some instructions for them;
- *User-led*: people will look to continue their journeys on the site in different ways. Offer them a few options for travel, such as site navigation, a map, a good search engine and results pages and a topic-led infrastructure;
- *Professional*: this seems strange to even mention in this publication with such an upstanding readership but the

amount of times I've seen a really slick ad or brochure from a very reputable company, only to go the site for more information and find a rainbow divider line and some old frame sets hanging around is shocking. The same holds true for out of date information on the site or e-mail addresses that never receive a response.

While the obvious point of my column this month is to be sure to think beyond simply getting people to the URL as a success metric for your marketing and promotional activities, my new dream for 2008 is that organisations will start to think about the percentage of their time and budgets they allocate for these user journeys once they get to the website as a part of these activities.

Fifteen years from now I only hope, that aside from swiping my arm to buy my groceries, my online experience is much more integrated with my other media consumption so while I may take a few different routes to my destination, I get there in one piece. ■

As always, e-mail me at Lynda@foursquaremedia.net with questions, comments or your own experiences.