

# IT MAY BE YOUR WEBSITE BUT IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

**HAVING A WEBSITE CAN MEAN DIDDLYSQUAT UNLESS YOU MAKE SURE IT DRAWS CUSTOMERS IN RATHER THAN TURNS THEM OFF, AS DAVID MAIDA DISCOVERS.**

Have you ever been frustrated by a website's design? Couldn't find the contacts page amongst the fancy drop-down menus? Or had to resort to the site map to avoid the convoluted navigation buttons?

You are not alone.

Far too many companies trying to build a presence on the Web are getting it wrong – and chances are it's for one simple reason.

"Your website shouldn't be about you," said Steve Langridge, general manager of QV Online. "It should be about the visitor and why they came to your website in the first place."

Self-promotion, e-vanity, call it what you will, when people have their first crack at the Web, many make their websites about themselves.

Speaking at the Auckland leg of last month's TUANZ (e)-vision forum – *Review your website for profit, service and performance* – Langridge explained that "optimising" his Web portal (selling property reports online) had resulted in customers spending 15 to 20 per cent more, and the removal of one of his helpdesk operators.

"Take the customer to the quick direct route from the home page through to registering and buying."

With more and more offline purchases being affected by online activity, website upgrades are becoming big business. Langridge said the QV upgrade cost around \$200,000 but the end results exceeded his expectations – and made the outlay value for money.

During the day-long forum, local Web designers, information analysts and Internet gurus gave the low-down on why some New Zealand websites are turning people off instead of drawing them in. (And, as it turns out, it's the same thing that is wrong with websites around the world – although that's small consolation, of course.)

Among those attending were government, institutional and commercial website developers, content managers and designers. From what I could see, they lapped up every tip and trade secret, especially how to make websites comply with new government accessibility guidelines coming into effect in January.

This included a series of online workshops that let people test websites for compliance against best-practice Web usability guidelines (more on this at [www.usability.gov/guidelines](http://www.usability.gov/guidelines)). The resulting "heuristic reviews" gave the attendees a good sense of what works and what doesn't.

"Technology is getting in the way of the goals we want it to achieve," said Optimal Usability's Trent Mankelow. "You need to be consistent and goal driven. Don't be cute."

Just about every business, institution and agency in New Zealand has a website these days, but their effectiveness varies greatly. Mankelow admitted that while some home-grown websites are on a par with the rest of the world, others remain "an example of what not to do".

He spoke about one New Zealand website – I won't mention any names – which he said was about "as bad as it gets".

"The home page is just a spattering of unlabelled boxes moving around which require the user to drag the mouse over each one to try and figure out what they are."

It was a recurring theme for the day; trying to be cool or funky really misses the boat in terms of the purpose the website is there to achieve. But, thankfully, things are starting to get better. The trend on improving websites is not some artsy design idea, but is very much driven by the bottom line.

"Big sites in New Zealand do the same job as everybody else in the world," said Mankelow, "but usability is still a very new field in New Zealand. I think we're at the stage where everybody has a website. They are just starting to want a return on it."

As New Zealand goes through this "go back and do it again" phase of website construction, Web developers are reaping the whirlwind. But, warned Click Suite's Simon Rogerson, you'd better do some thinking before you launch head first into it.

"You have to look behind the reasons for redesigning," he said. "What is the website there to achieve? You need to set measurability factors from the beginning so you can come back and see how well you've done."



Reviewing: Audience in Auckland

If all this isn't enough to keep you up at night, there's always the nightmare of how to keep website content fresh.

David Harvey is the ICT director for the Manurewa High School and expressed the frustration a lot of organisations struggle with over fresh content.

"They want us to do it as an extra-curricular activity. I spend about an hour a week on it."

Rogerson said the key to content is to remember to keep it audience focused.

"One of the key strategies is to create free content which makes people interested in purchasing value-added information."

But, most importantly, Mankelow said that as people redesign their websites, make sure to keep it user focused.

"There is a reason people visit your website. You should not get in the way of those goals."

No, indeed. And, by the end of the day, the message certainly appeared to be sinking in. Those I spoke to admitted never even considering some of the issues raised – which is good and bad news, in a funny sort of way. Everyone wanted to learn more about how customers are interacting with websites and how to make sure they don't have to figure out their way around them.

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