



## TICKED OFF

BY DAVID MAIDA

**THE IDEA BEHIND LIVE WEB BOXES AND SCROLLING TICKERS IN WEBSITE DESIGN IS THAT THEY IMPROVE THE BROWSER EXPERIENCE. BUT, AS DAVID MAIDA DISCOVERED, IN REALITY THEY ARE CAN BE A ROADBLOCK THAT TURNS USERS AWAY FROM THE SITE.**

Live Web boxes and scrolling tickers are a prominent feature of many websites. In particular, news websites often use these devices to convey breaking news. But, said usability expert and director of Optimal Usability Trent Mankelow, these features can interfere with people's ability to read onscreen information.

"Given the limited amount of real estate that you've got on any given page, you can't show everything to everyone. So the idea (of scrolling text) is that when you rotate through the different elements of content ... as people are looking through that page they'll say, 'Oh, OK, that looks interesting. I didn't realise they were covering that bit of news.'"

Yet, in attempting to read Web pages that feature animated boxes, Mankelow's often had to use his hand or a piece of paper to cover up moving text because it's too distracting.

"They need to be done well because invariably when you've got something that's animated you're going to be drawing the user's eye to that object. So you make it more difficult to access the rest of the content on that page."

Mankelow suggests the most effective use of live Web boxes is to keep them relatively static. He cites the example of a box on the Department of Conservation (DOC) website which gently fades from one exhibit to the other.

“It’s letting people know of the fresh, new content on the website and the depth of content without overwhelming them - particularly because the animation is actually fairly slow.”

Web developer Peter McVicar said that Web boxes are deceptively easy to program and this could be one reason for their widespread use in poor applications.

“They take a little bit of Java Script and HTML knowledge. It’s easy to code something. It’s more about making sure that it’s coded right and that people can actually use it properly. Throwing technology at it doesn’t fix the problem. If it has got a good use and a good purpose then it will be there for a reason and people will use it. But if not, it’s a complete waste of time.”

According to McVicar, a common mistake is to use live Web boxes that import information on to the page from elsewhere.

“They are kind of like a dying breed at the moment ... mainly because of accessibility issues and things like that. It doesn’t work with people who are blind and are using screen readers, because what happens is that a little bit of code is constantly refreshing and so the screen reader constantly comes back to read that. It makes the page completely unreadable,” said McVicar.

These boxes typically use Java or Flash programs, two applications which are currently giving way to ‘asynchronous JavaScript technology and XML’ (AJAX).

“AJAX is basically taking XML documents and updating them automatically on screen,” said McVicar.

Google maps and gmail are already using this technology to allow users to interface with Web pages without the Web page appearing to refresh. Google maps can be pulled across the screen and Gmail conversations can be starred seamlessly.

“Effectively that’s the next step up from those boxes or those little ticker tape things,” said McVicar.

No doubt AJAX will also find its way into the hands of those who will misuse it. But as with any technology, McVicar said people should use the most appropriate thing in the most appropriate place.

“It’s really about what your users want and need as opposed to what you think looks cool or works best. If you can justify it from a user point of view then absolutely fine; if you can’t then you should probably take it out.”

He suggests people focus on larger issues like information architecture and Web strategy rather than trying to have the neatest-looking live Web box on their site.

“They see it on another, more successful company’s website and think, ‘Oh if we do that, we will be just as successful.’ But that’s not what actually makes the site successful.”



Scrolling news tickers on both the TVNZ and TV3 websites are examples of a particularly poor use of technology, according to usability expert and director of Optimal Usability Trent Mankelow.

He said TVNZ.co.nz has news headlines which jitter across the screen from right to left and do not stop when you scroll the mouse over them.

“You can see on that page it’s just a shocker. If you want to read anything you’ve got this stuff going across. And the fact that it doesn’t stop is just a no-no, because there’s no way once it’s gone past. You might have been interested in that type of content, and now the ticker has stopped you from getting there and you have to wait until it comes around again. It’s not smart at all,” said Mankelow.

Yet when approached by *Topics*, TVNZ public affairs manager Megan Richards replied in an email that the broadcaster had received no complaints about this feature on their website.

“TVNZ has not had any complaints about this aspect of what we regard as our full and very good service to viewers. We’re happy to look at this and we’re open to constructive feedback, but we would point out that tickers like ours are standard news delivery devices across the globe. Our ticker slows and is clickable, as is the norm for other international sites.”

One overseas broadcaster with a website worth checking out is the BBC’s which, according to Mankelow, uses the technology effectively.

“The BBC is actually an interesting one to look at. They’ve done a fairly recent relaunch. One of the different things that they do is that they actually scroll text from left to right which helps with reading.”

Back home and the TV3\* website is, according to Mankelow, even less effective than its main rival. He said the multiple boxes that pull up current content take forever to load, but at least their news headlines stop when you scroll over them.

“The TV3 website in general is just an absolute shocker. I would say that one is scrolling even faster than TVNZ, actually. They’ve just made so many basic mistakes.”

\*TV3 was given the opportunity to reply to the criticism in this article, but did not respond.