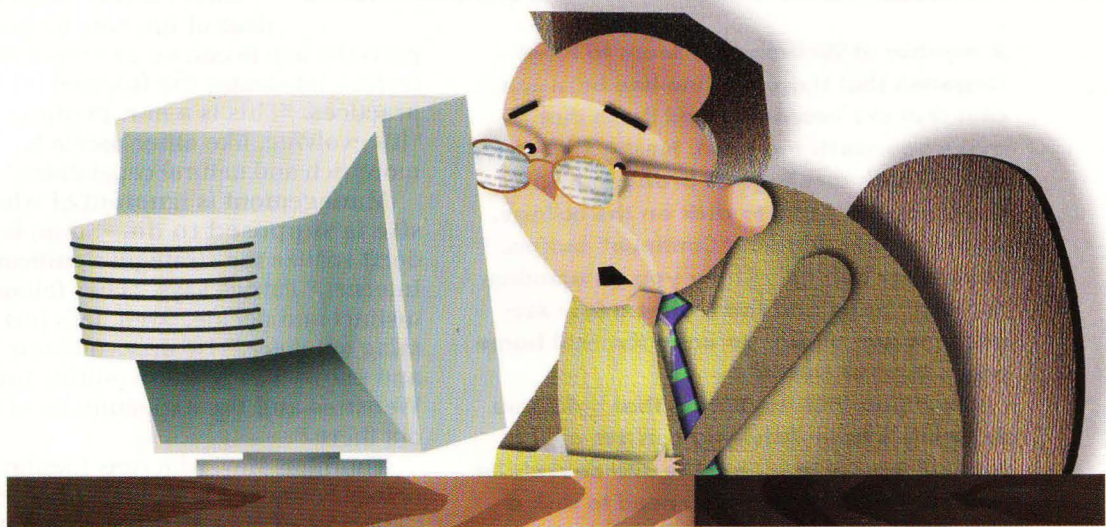


# Why Are So Many Websites So Bad?

There are at least three reasons.

Should you care? Yes, since one of these

Websites is likely to be yours.



It's been only a couple of years since the powers that be decreed that the Internet represented the future and every major company should have a Website, and by now, indeed, every major company has one. But, unfortunately, most corporate Websites are *bad*—unsightly (literally), difficult to work with, and missing vital content. The question is why.

Three possibilities:

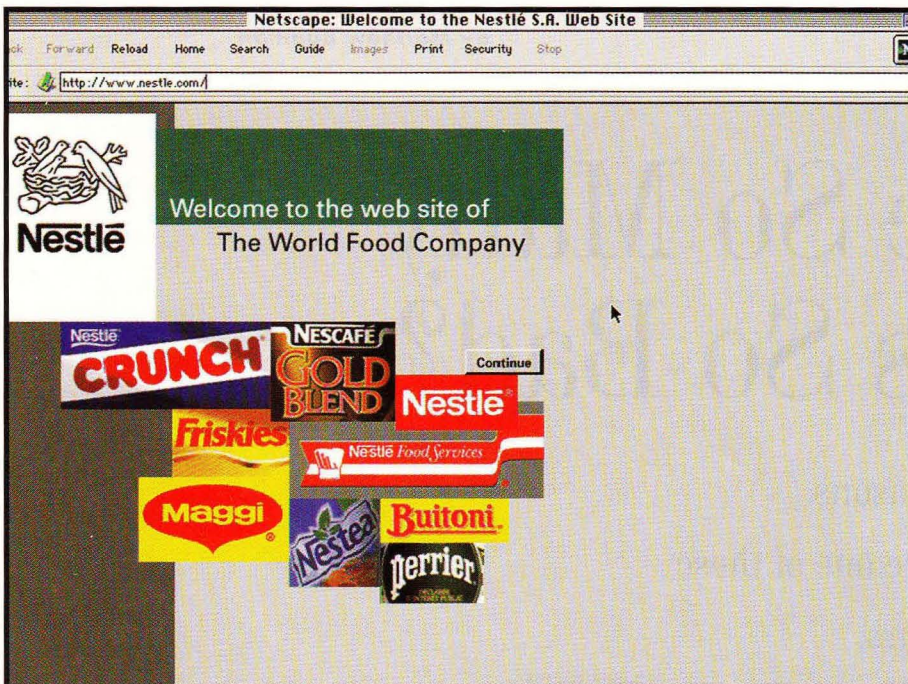
**Managers don't really believe the Internet is all that important to them.** A well-rounded corporate Website absolutely depends on buy-in, commitment, and input from all corners of the company; it's all too clear that most firms aren't getting that.

Without companywide involvement, Web design is handled by one of three entities: an interactive agency specializing in advertising and graphic design, a management consult-

ing firm, or an internal Internet department. None of these is up to the task of creating an effective corporate Website, says Dotan Saguy, an Andersen Consulting senior consultant who managed Web projects for IBM, Sony, Sprint, and New York Life Insurance while working at Eagle River Interactive.

"Most companies that use their internal resources to build a corporate Website fail at design, strategy, and technology," Saguy says. "The majority of interactive agencies still act too much like the advertising agencies that incubated them: They end up delivering Websites that look good and are aligned with the company's marketing strategy but don't fully leverage the electronic-commerce technol-

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**A number of Webmasters seem to have forgotten that there's a fine line between sites that are interactive and those that make you work too hard. Nestlé S.A. starts you off with a collage of brand logos; to continue, you have to click on the collage, or on the tiny, hidden "Continue" button. Some sites helpfully show you an opening "splash" page and then, after a few seconds, automatically go on to the real home page, but not Nestlé's.**

**Once you find the button that links you to Nestlé's financials, you can get to annual reports et al, but the site doesn't let you just read the text—you need to click a button that downloads the file onto your personal hard drive. Those files are in the Adobe Acrobat format, which your computer probably can't read. The good news: The Website offers a button that lets you download the Adobe Reader application as well, which allows you to open the financial document. The bad news: Now both the Nestlé file and the Adobe application are stuck somewhere on your hard drive, just so much electronic clutter, until you—or one of the company techies—goes in and deletes them. If you can find them.**

ogy that will soon be a key success factor. The agencies also don't generally fully understand their client's business and are unable to successfully tie Websites into their client's internal business processes and IT legacy. This last skill is, of course, the Big Five's forte,

but the consulting giants haven't yet truly mastered the graphic-design aspect, which is critical in these days of 'design jungle' on the Web."

Divorced from the planning and operating of a company's Website, many people find the promise of an online-assisted working world remote; they have trouble seeing how this incorporeal *thing* somewhere in cyberspace is supposed to help them do their jobs better. For employees and managers who don't directly take customer orders or look at new employment applications, the link between the company's Web presence and their working lives is a tenuous one—so tenuous, in fact, that it's not worth serious attention.

John Patrick, IBM's vice president of Internet technology, expects

the gap to narrow as Corporate America further integrates the Internet into business practices. "This is a new medium," he says. "It's evolving, like other media have, to have more rich and natural capabilities."

Management is ignorant of what a Website is supposed to do. "Some companies don't realize the strategic significance of the Internet," Patrick says. "They follow the herd instinct and decide, 'Well, let's just get *something* out there.'" He urges aligning "the skills and knowledge of those putting together the Websites and the expectations of the users out there."

Thornton May, who runs Cambridge Technology Partners' Management Lab, elaborates: "The root of poor Websites is a more fundamental problem—confusion on the part of the corporation about the nature and shape of the relationship with the consumer."

As companies with well-integrated Websites have discovered, the Internet is a terrific medium to establish or deepen a customer relationship. It may be helpful to think of a Website as an enormous advertisement, one far more effective than a TV or newspaper pitch—by definition, a visit is not only interactive but tuned-in. You want those who visit your pages to find what they're looking for and linger, to come away with an upbeat feeling about the company, and to have specific questions answered. You want to make a good impression.

It's no small task to set up a site that accomplishes this. Optimally, your Website should satisfy the needs of all the different constituencies who might happen by. A visitor should be able to get a sense of what your company is about, to check out your last

quarterly financials, to request more information, to read the latest news about the company and its products, to—if appropriate—order products, and to apply for a job. All this, without having to devote an unreasonable amount of time and effort, and without having to move from his keyboard.

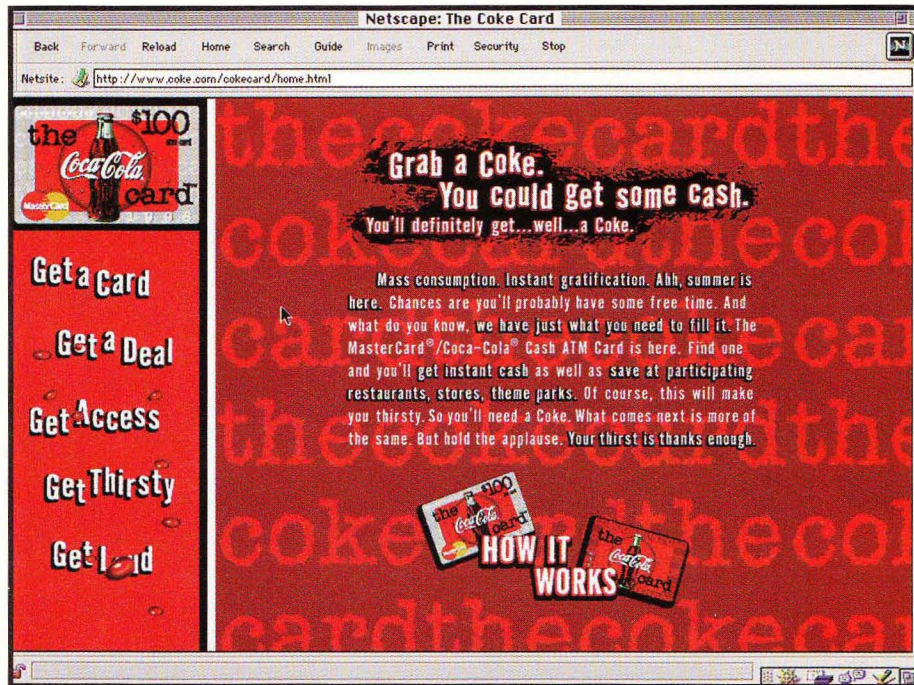
And because the visitor's time investment is significant, and because the MTV influence has shortened attention spans, the payoff, whether in information or entertainment, must be worthwhile. Every obstacle—a counter-intuitive Web address, slow-loading screens, hard-to-find text—gives viewers a reason to head for another site, as casually as changing the channel when a commercial disrupts a TV show.

No one in management has looked at the company's own Website lately. This, more than anything, may be the key. Chances are good that the upper echelon's last contact with the Internet was signing off on a budget line. "There is a big gap between the visionary level of a company's leadership and the crew of techies and marketers who patch together a Website," says Michael Finley, author of *Techno-Crazed: The Businessperson's Guide to Controlling Technology—Before It Controls You* (Petersons).

Unfortunately, it falls to the visionary level—that's you—to close that gap. After all, who is your inadequate site hurting? You. If your Website appears shoddy, unmanaged, and outdated, it reflects poorly on the company and its leadership—it doesn't matter that your products or services may not lend themselves to interactivity or online sales. More people will visit your site than will peruse the CEO's statement in your annual report. And don't think that Web viewers don't count—they're your employees, your customers, your investors.

The bottom line: You should devote more time and effort to crafting a user-friendly, info-packed Website than to polishing that annual-report essay. Sound like conventional wisdom? You wouldn't know it from the lackluster sites that many companies put up.

"The greater majority of companies have failed to respond to the opportunities presented by the Internet," says Palo Alto, Calif., consultant Shelley Taylor, who surveyed 100 corporate sites and found that many companies "appear to place very little value on the Web as a strategic communications medium. These companies seem to have no systematic approach to Web design or content. They dem-

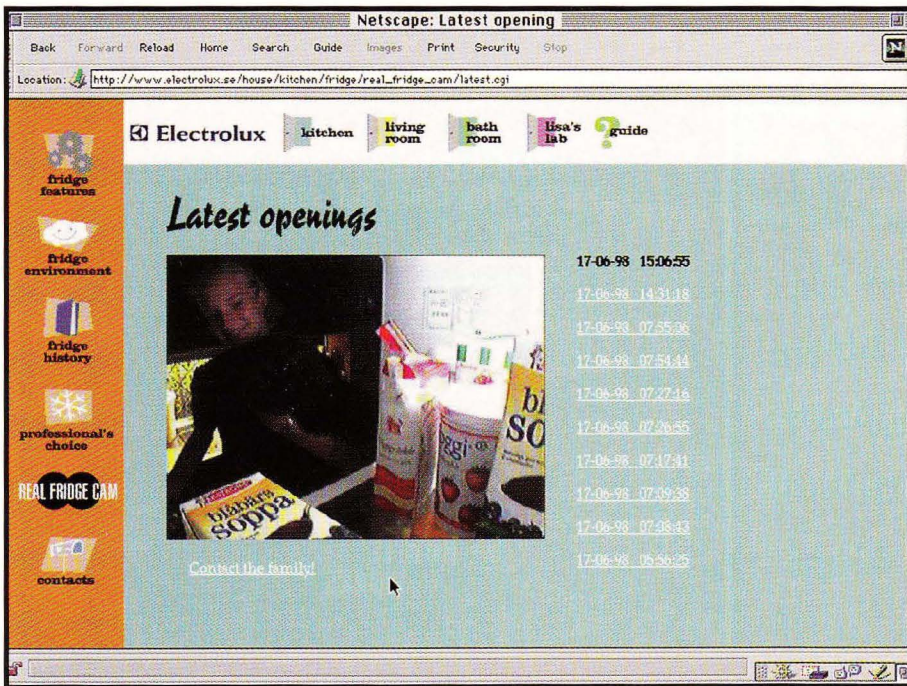


Coca-Cola's graphics-heavy site has a different target audience from the norm: It caters to 16-year-old computer geeks with the latest, hottest hardware and software. The first page gives you three confusing options: "I have ALL the recommended TECHNOLOGY"; "I DON'T have everything, but I DO HAVE SHOCKWAVE 6.0"; and "I'm ignoring you, let me in anyway. (NON-SHOCKED)." What is this about? Do you know if you have Shockwave 6.0? Or even what Shockwave 6.0 is? Or what might happen if you enter the Website without Shockwave 6.0?

Once you get past that, the second page, shown here, presents a new obstacle: It requires a "plug-in" called QuickTime. If your computer already has QuickTime, the page still doesn't give you any information—just rambling ad copy for a Coca-Cola MasterCard. From this point, it takes an unreasonable amount of guesswork and patience to track down, say, an earnings statement. But you'll give up long before that. Says consultant Shelley Taylor: "Coke's site is the all-time loser. A business user is never going to survive these first two pages."

onstrate the huge lag between the potential offered by this new medium and the ability of companies to exploit it. Companies intend Websites to be interactive, but most of them are not. They serve as electronic billboards."

Finley agrees: "Most corporations currently use Websites as adjuncts to PR—profile ad-



Almost everything on Electrolux's site is engaging and fun, but the highlight is "The Amazing Real Fridge Cam," an inside-the-fridge snapshot updated every time someone opens the refrigerator door in a Stockholm, Sweden, house. "What's it like to live with a camera in your fridge? Go ahead and contact the Essén family, and they'll tell you all about it," the accompanying text says, giving the smiling family members' names (including Pörri, the cat) and a form to send e-mail to the Esséns.

vertising, with a smattering of customer service thrown in." Plenty don't get even that far: A recent *New York Times* survey of "two dozen well-known, consumer-focused corporations" found that customer response was mediocre at best—five of the 24 took a week or more to reply to an e-mailed question, and another five never responded at all.

Of course, moving beyond that primitive stage demands serious planning and resources. A recent Gartner Group report found that advancing from a rudimentary site to one with modest features and goals requires "a multiyear business plan and buy-in from senior management and is as much a political process as a technical one." It also costs perhaps half a million dollars. To set up a full-featured site that brings in new business, "migrates traditional business to the Internet," and streamlines customer-supplier communication, look to spend upward—maybe well upward—of \$2 million, with a corresponding investment in time and energy by everyone on the organizational chart.

Your company probably doesn't need a Website that goes quite that far—after all, relatively few industries lend themselves to conducting big chunks of business online. And it's not your fault if you're unsure of the most effective way to present your company on the Internet. "What *should* a *Fortune* 500 company's Website do? There is no consensus," Finley says. "We know that a newspaper shows news, and a CD seller sells CDs. What, say, should a plastic-extrusions company do online?"

What indeed? The best way to understand what your company's Website might be missing—and what your company might be missing out on as a result—is to check out other corporate sites. So block out a couple of hours, settle in, boot up Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer, and start cruising.

### www.where?.com

The first step is actually locating the particular site you're looking for. Some companies don't make this as easy as you'd expect or hope. Want to reach Virgin Direct, the financial-services arm of Richard Branson's Virgin Group? Don't try [www.virgin-direct.com](http://www.virgin-direct.com)—unless you want to find a link to a consumer organization aimed at rooting out scam artists who use misleading Web addresses. "This freely available domain name was purchased by NotCon at the beginning of March 1998," reads a disclaimer, "solely to highlight how easy it is to create a 'copycat' site that could potentially be used for Internet fraud." Said an April 30 *London Times* article: "It seems almost unbelievable but Virgin Direct had not bothered to register its trademark."

Unbelievable, sure, but hardly unusual. WorldCom is at [www.wcom.com](http://www.wcom.com) but not [www.worldcom.com](http://www.worldcom.com). Times Mirror is at [www.tm.com](http://www.tm.com) but not [www.timesmirror.com](http://www.timesmirror.com)—and The New York Times Co. snagged [www.times.com](http://www.times.com) as well as [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), so Times Mirror was out of luck there.

Forget the hyphen in [www.wal-mart.com](http://www.wal-mart.com) or in [www.duke-energy.com](http://www.duke-energy.com), and you'll get "This address does not exist" notices. (And yes, if you forget the hyphen in [www.conference-board.org](http://www.conference-board.org), you won't get anywhere either.)

SmithKline Beecham's Web address is [www.sb.com](http://www.sb.com), which is concise but cryptic. Keep in mind that by not hooking up [www.smithklinebeecham.com](http://www.smithklinebeecham.com) as well, the multinational—which reported sales of \$12.8 billion in 1997—is saving in the neighborhood of \$70 a year.

The upshot: To locate the companies' sites,

you have to use a third-party source, such as a search engine. It's an unfortunate obstacle to would-be visitors.

And once a visitor finds a Website, it doesn't take much to turn her off. Complex photos and graphics quickly thwart non-techies who don't get PC memory upgrades every other week. Their machines slow down and, worse, nothing actually comes up on-screen for an excruciating period of time—just empty boxes signifying missing pictures. If they don't actually *need* the information they're looking for, they're not going to bother.

### The Good Sites

Of the 100 Websites Taylor surveyed, just three provide "a relatively high level of content and activities" to customers, potential employees, and shareholders: Sun Microsystems, AT&T, and Bell Atlantic. And, indeed, the sites are smoothly competent.

Sun's site is everything you might expect from a manufacturer of high-end computer systems—and more: It's actually user-friendly. The Sun site has everything from information for software developers to deals on Sun workstations to photos and biographies of all the corporate officers. Nothing on the site dazzles, but it's graphically clean and consistent. It doesn't waste any of your time.

Bell Atlantic's site is similarly streamlined, though some may find it frustrating that BA subscribers (I'm one) can't access phone records or pay bills, or even find out how much particular services cost. AT&T delivers an overwhelming amount of information within an easily negotiable framework.

While only these three Websites meet most of Taylor's tough standards—and, she adds, those three aren't favorites; they have all the required information, but they're not all that graceful—some others should satisfy most users.

A few sites, some from unlikely companies, provide tremendous entertainment value. Electrolux's charming, heavily interactive site offers engaging graphics and fun games. To accompany information about a prototype robot vacuum cleaner, the site delivers a wealth of material about the robot's design history and inspiration (a prehistoric trilobite!). There's so much happening on the Electrolux site—actual product and service info as well as cartoon fun—that you'll never notice the absence of a welcome-to-the-company overview. Even if you're not in the market for a refrigerator or vacuum cleaner, you'll likely

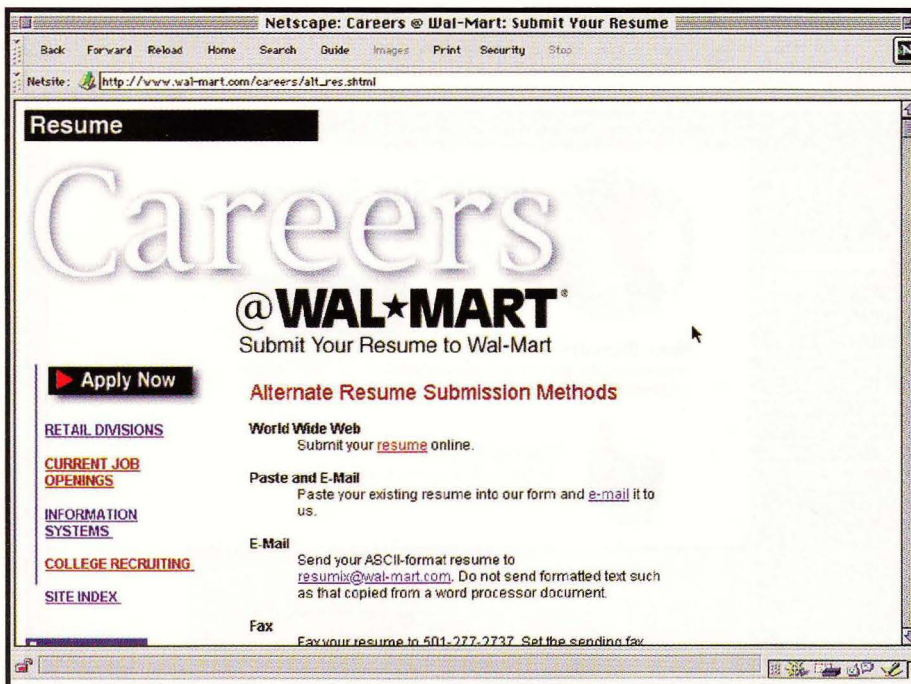


**"Often sites are created on the Web without a clear sense of how all the components of the site work together," says author Michael Finley. The Sun Microsystems site has a helpful search function, which most sites oddly lack. More important, the screen offers a general site index on every page, shown here on the left side and top of the screen, so you can get from one section of the site to another without going back to the home page. Fewer than half the sites that consultant Taylor studied include "global navigation."**

**Why do Websites look so different, and why haven't all the sites adopted features like global navigation? "The inconsistency in Website design is due to the fact that, by definition, there is no common operating system," says Dotan Saguy of Andersen Consulting. "There are no dictates that there has to be a menu bar at the top, that buttons have to be gray, etc. Remember the early DOS years: Every piece of software had an entirely different type of user interface. Eventually, industry standards were adopted that made software more intuitive for users, and today anyone who knows Microsoft Word can learn any PC-based software very quickly. Well, the Web is currently in its early DOS years."**

spend a good amount of time on the site and come away with a fresh opinion of Electrolux, which alone makes the site a success.

Royal Dutch/Shell has a link to a Ferrari



**Wal-Mart gives job-seekers (just for the Bentonville, Ark., corporate office, please) several ways to submit résumés: fax, mail, and three different e-mail methods. There's also a detailed list of job openings (mostly computer-related). Incredibly, one-third of major companies have no recruitment features on their Websites, says consultant Taylor, and 61 percent have no recruitment links on their home pages. "There's such competition for brainpower among high-tech jobs, and you'd think this would be the best medium for recruiting for the Internet," she says.**

page, and by following a few well-explained steps, you can make your PC produce the roar of a Ferrari accelerating. It's hard to think of a better way to kill a spare few minutes.

The Times Mirror site offers a rotating photo gallery showcasing thematically linked pictures from its seven newspapers. The intriguingly dubbed "History Center" provides a chronology of significant or interesting events in Times Mirror's history—such as the delivery of the *Times* by carrier pigeon in 1894 and the bombing of the *Times* building in 1910—which is accessible by decade going back to 1870.

### The Problem Sites

Taylor's primary complaint about corporate Websites is that most ignore one or two of their key audiences (customers, prospective employees, shareholders) in favor of just one. "The problem with the single-audience focus is that it reflects a lack of strategic cohesion,

and shareholders can tell," she says. "It's transparent. Companies risk walking around naked with all their warts showing."

WorldCom, for example, makes its target audience clear: investors. Financial information on the company is copious, clearly arranged, and easily accessible, featuring a helpful list of 30 analysts who follow WorldCom, along with their phone and fax numbers. There isn't much you could want that isn't here—unless you're a potential customer interested in, say, residential phone service, in which case you may be disappointed by the much skimpier information available. (Before WorldCom updated its residential-user section this summer, the facts and figures presented hadn't been changed in nearly a year.)

A number of Websites don't succeed in effectively reaching anyone. Consider the NatWest Group site, which opens, without explanation, on eight banking logos (subsidiaries? parent companies? branches?). Clicking on any of seven of these takes you to corresponding pages; clicking on the Greenwich NatWest logo takes you, well, nowhere—it's linked to nothing at all. To get general information, you have to click on a small "Welcome to the NatWest Group" button at the side of the screen, and even there you don't get much.

Throughout the site, where there's text it's usually vague to the point of boilerplate. Here's how NatWest describes how "we are dealing with" the Year 2000 issue: "As with any large organisation, we operate a wide range of computer systems and we depend on them to support our day to day banking activities. Therefore, we are taking the issue seriously and we have estimated the total cost to be approximately £150 million for the work that we will carry out. Our work will look at all aspects of the issue including the possible effect it could have on our computer systems, our customers and our suppliers."

That's it. No details on how Y2K might affect *you*, whether you're a customer, investor, or employee. This is not helpful, or useful, or informative, or reassuring. (By contrast, AT&T devotes a comprehensive sub-site to Y2K, even offering to send, by e-mail, answers to frequently asked questions about the issue.)

Other companies offer all too much personality online. Reebok's baffling site presents you with an amorphous opening screen—an ad, a lot of blue screen, and several ambiguous buttons: "The Sports," "Classic," "Shoes & Stuff." Click on these, and you might find

what you're looking for. If you're hoping to locate and read the company charter in any of nine languages, you'll do fine. On the other hand, it takes a little patience and a lot of luck to dig up information on a particular pair of shoes, which is, presumably, the company's *raison d'être*.

If you're lucky enough to stumble upon Reebok's financial information, be prepared to put some effort into reading it. To read just one 1,500-word press release on first-quarter 1998 earnings, the Website makes you download a Microsoft Word file to your hard drive. To read the release, you have to open a word-processing application and find the file (cryptically named "1q98rel.doc") on your PC. After you've read it, the file remains on your hard drive; eventually you'll have to find it again to delete it. Want to read about *second-quarter* earnings? Repeat all of the above.

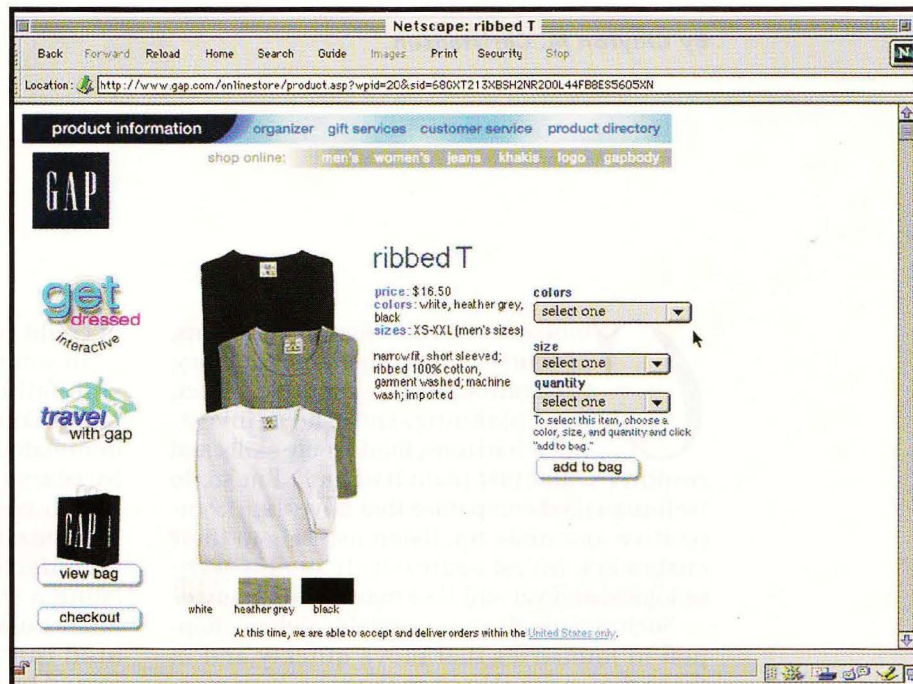
"The Web is the absolutely fastest way to get financial information, and investors say they would prefer to get that information direct from the companies," Taylor says. "But the companies aren't delivering."

### Your Place on the Web

Sure, no one knows what changes the Internet will go through in the next several years, what shape the online world will take in the century to come. But for now, a good Website can serve several functions for you, and it's crucial that you don't fall behind your competitors. "Corporate Websites create an opportunity to increase the level of conversation with key stakeholders," Taylor says. "They can serve as a powerful communication vehicle and as an important component in the elusive knowledge-management puzzle."

Look at, say, chain family restaurants. Cracker Barrel Old Country Store ([www.crackerbarrel.com](http://www.crackerbarrel.com) or [www.crackerbarrel.com](http://www.crackerbarrel.com)) has an attractive, simple Website with menus, merchandise, and information. Likewise, Chi-Chi's, International House of Pancakes, Pizzeria Uno, Friendly's, Olive Garden, Shoney's, and T.G.I. Friday's all have competent sites (though if you forget the hyphen in Chi-Chi's or the *s* in Friday's, you're out of luck). But it's harder to locate Bennigan's—I tracked down a subsite devoted to the chain at [www.khconline.com/ben2.htm](http://www.khconline.com/ben2.htm)—and sites for Denny's and Applebee's are still under construction.

Does the fact that there's no Denny's Web-



**"In online purchasing, even the best examples leave a lot to be desired," Taylor says. "On the Gap's site, it takes six clicks to make a purchase. On Amazon.com, it takes only two clicks. And the Gap is really good, comparatively. But in a Gap store you can walk right in and buy something, and it hasn't translated its store philosophy to this new medium." The Gap's site is also lacking in both presale assistance and postsale support and service. "Most sites don't tell you how to return a product if it's defective, or about technical support or product upgrades, or how to make an online inquiry," Taylor says. "You'd never buy anything in a store if you couldn't ask any questions."**

**IBM's John Patrick says that most Websites' capabilities lag far behind customers' expectations: "Companies need to realize that the expectations of people are rising dramatically. A lot of sites say, 'Click here to buy,' and then give you a 1-800 number to call; they don't know that giving a credit-card number over the Internet is now actually safer than giving it over the phone, and that customers know that."**

site mean that so much as a single diner will decide to head to a Cracker Barrel instead? Perhaps not. But it doesn't make Denny's look good to anyone on Taylor's list of Web constituents: customers, potential employees, and shareholders. Why risk alienating any of them? ■