

Internet Intelligence:

Is the World Wide Web taking over your life? Here are seven smart tips for keeping up with technology without losing staff time, money - or sleep.

By Michael Matros

#1 Decide on Your Purpose

If you haven't done so already, gather colleagues from relevant departments to establish your organization's goals for its Internet presence. The purpose of this meeting is not to discuss the electronic wonders you can offer Internet visitors. Rather, your purpose is to agree on what you want to communicate, and to whom.

"People often allow technology to drive the message," says Donna Freddolino. She's the director of customer support at Business Systems Resources, an advancement software firm in Waltham, Mass., and a frequent speaker on Internet topics. No matter how sophisticated or innovative you make your Web presence, Freddolino says, content is what matters: "It's the danger of cool; you can look great but have no value."

Your organizational meeting is also the place to decide who will maintain your Web site. Think of it as a publication. Someone who understands public relations or periodicals should have primary responsibility. Otherwise, the site may end up looking dull, haphazard, or amateurish.

#2 See What's Out There

Once you have an idea of what you want to say, do some exploring to find out how others are saying it.

To learn what works well, and what doesn't, take some time to visit other organizations' Web sites. As you browse, first you'll see how different the various home pages are. Then you'll begin to notice the similarities.

"Once you're on the Web," says Patricia Facciponti, associate director of public information at Lafayette College, "the best way to start is to examine a page you like. Copy it, download it, study it." Take notes while you're

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wandering. Look closely at the elements you'd like to include in your home page; jot down the ways the creators have made the site easy to navigate.

And take care to manage your time. Before you start wandering the Web, decide how long you're going to spend there -- and then don't extend your visit. If you stay out too long, you'll lose your ability to discriminate. Besides, you've got other work to do.

#3 Don't Be in Such a Hurry

"People think everyone else is doing better than they are," says Freddolino of BSR. "Then, in their haste, they do things poorly rather than well."

So take a deep breath. It may seem like everyone has a Web site up already, but it is also true that many of those sites are poorly executed. An unattractive, uninteresting site may be worse than no site at all.

Consistency and accuracy are important, says Richard Nirenberg, director of college relations at William Paterson College of New Jersey. "Whatever information is up there needs to be correct, maintained, and updated," he says.

#4 Keep Your Standards High

It's becoming easier all the time to add Web pages to your site. But that doesn't mean you can afford to get lazy about planning, editing, and design. A quick tour of Web pages will tell you why. Visit the sites of folks who should know better, and you'll often find "it's" where "its" should be. Or type running on top of photographs. Or hotlinks so cold they obviously haven't been checked in weeks.

It takes time to do it right. But it's worth it. Your Web site reveals no less about you than your prized publications. Typos, unattractive pages, and hard-to-navigate paths give a negative impression of your institution. So does dull information that seldom changes.

#5 Discuss Issues of Control

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One day someone made a comment to Patricia Larsen about the Web page of St. Matthew's Episcopal Day School, where she is director of development. Surprised to learn that the school even had a home page, Larsen searched, a little nervously, and found the site. A church parishioner had created it as part of a larger site about parish activities -- and though she'd used only information that the school had produced, some of it was old news.

Larsen called the woman, chatted informally, then said, "By the way, you're using an outdated logo." The parishioner was eager to cooperate, so Larsen sent a new logo, along with some recent photographs. Taking over the page wasn't an option for Larsen: Her office isn't yet connected to the Internet. "So at the moment," she says, "this arrangement works for us."

The St. Matthew's example is extreme, of course; most institutions launch their own Web sites. Even so, you're bound to face questions of control. And any "official" home page should always reside in-house.

#6 Watch Out For Wasted Time

No doubt about it: It's fun to explore the colorful mazes that other organizations offer their virtual visitors. But think about the staff time each click can cost. No matter how easy it becomes to navigate the Web, another two hours may pass even though you promised yourself the trip would take only 10 minutes.

As you create or imitate Internet uses for media work, publications, or donor research, keep close track of the time each job takes. List the results you'd hoped for -- and the results you got. Decide whether your time on the Web was worthwhile.

Also list the results you're getting on your own site. Keep a count, for example, of how many hits a certain service attracts. Be as quantitative as possible. When you find that some projects don't pay off, abandon them or put them aside for later.

#7 Be Clear About Web Assignments

Specify the requirements for each online project and decide who's responsible. Don't assume that everyone in the office needs practice and time learning all Internet applications.

"Be clear about how each use of the technology fits each job description," Freddolino says. "During business hours, not everyone from secretaries to executives should spend hours cruising the World Wide Web. You need to ask yourself how Internet use fits within their assigned responsibilities."

Of course, not every organization has the luxury of dividing up responsibilities. If you work in a one-person office, you're in charge of everything, including the Web. So get smart: Use technology to make yourself more efficient, not less. The Web can be very seductive, even addictive -- like sex, drugs, and chocolate éclairs.

In fact, the Web may be worse than other vices, because you can more easily rationalize the time you spend with it. Even if it's not immediately applicable to the job at hand, you say to yourself, it's all part of a professional culture you need to know about and operate in. But the problem is, as one online discussion participant mentioned, "You find a great resource, then click on the Dilbert link."

In the final analysis, it's a matter of balance. The experts offer this advice: Don't shoot your computer, but don't love it too much either. This is a relationship that can be saved, if you remember who's boss.

After all, learning to manage the Internet means not letting it manage you.

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